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Abstract

The absence of orality in Bible construction and communication is the "big forgot" and "fatal flaw" for many interpreters coming from book cultures. Overlooking or trivializing orality diminishes God-intended emotive impact, aesthetics, and meaning because the hermeneutic oxygen for interpreting Bible narratives is found in orality. Including holistic orality will make interpretation and application of the spoken-written word of God much more oral, natural, relational, impactful, communicatable, universal, God focused; it will take interpreters beyond the theological headlines to a fuller, richer author-intended meaning.

Introduction

Bible interpreters who inadvertently wade into the murky, muddy, multiple tributaries of orality are those most likely to be tripped up in discovering a fuller meaning of biblical narratives. That is, *unless* some unconscious assumptions are first ascertained and adjusted.

Could comprehending orality advance interpreters beyond Enlightenment-modernity influence? beyond privileged Evangelical pedagogy and hermeneutics?

Does orality throw the Book under the bus? Or does orality enhance the Book, requiring new rungs for our hermeneutic ladder?

How pervasive is orality in Scripture? Does the oral-aural energize, enhance meaning? What happens if orality is overlooked or trivialized, particularly in the narrative sections of Scripture?

This article offers a working definition of orality followed by five often unassumed assumptions related to how orality influenced Bible composition and communication. Could a better grasp of these assumptions enhance Bible interpretation and communication? I conclude with some strategic questions that could help answer the above question. The question that drives this article is, What happens in Bible interpretation and communication if the role of orality in Scripture is overlooked on minimized?

Types of Bible Interpreters

Bible interpreters generally fall into two camps—professionals who spent significant time formally studying Scripture and practitioners who mostly studied Scripture non-formally. For many from the West, including Easterners who studied under them, were highly literate. Books, dissertations, libraries, syllabuses, PowerPoints, research papers, tests, automatically accompanied.

The same holds true for critical thinking—cause-and-effect logic that takes interpreters linearly (compared to circular, spiral, uncharted journey[1]) and literally through intentionally fragmented parts to granular status. In the Evangelical world, the grammatical-historical hermeneutic tends to receive most favored nation status as does systematic theology with its cognitive concepts and categories.

Interestingly, it's difficult to find a prominent hermeneutic textbook, old or new, that addresses orality in canon construction and interpretation.[2] Know any? Does anything get lost?

Types of Oralists

The setting was a training session for Ansipolo municipality workers held at the Town Hall in Ifugao Province, Philippines, in 2018. The acting Mayor graced the tribal audience that represented two dialects. A selected group had composed a new song for the municipality to be sung in all government-run schools. Test time had arrived.

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[1] While the West tends to name theologies—Latin, Asian, African, Black—not so for its own, including color (white). This assumes its theology—unlike others—is universal. No designate is therefore necessary. Have we done the same with logic? Do we assume authentic, universal logic is propositional?

[2] I recently asked a hermeneutic professor: "Are you aware of any (old to new) *recognized* hermeneutic books that address orality?" "Unfortunately (or fortunately?)," he responded, "I can't add anything to the reading list." In *Scripture as Communication*, Jeannine Brown includes a single footnote citing Ong's classic *Orality and Literacy*.

The leader wrote the song and music notes on paper and taped it to a building for all to see. She moved seamlessly from two Ifugao dialects to English.

The leader then proceeded from measure to measure (three to four words each) singing each three times. She went through the entire three-verse song following the same pattern.

We learned about quarter and half notes, minors, full and half beats. By the end of 20 measures the audience was distracted, bored, fidgety. A brave young girl raised her hand and in English asked the following very respectively to someone her senior in a strongly shame-oriented culture, "Madame, could you please just sing the entire song for us so we can understand it?" To save face, the moderator immediately tried to deflect the stinging, shameful, insulting question: "She did this, so we don't make a mistake."

The leader sang through the song again, repeatedly stopping after every measure. For some reason she found it difficult to sing through the song in its entirety. After the fragmented rendition she finally sang the complete song. The audience then sang it in its entirety. A sense of relief followed. A fragmented song had finally given way communally to its full beauty and impact.

Because the tributaries of orality are multiple, murky, and muddy, *no* monolithic form of orality prevails globally. Rather, *oralities* exist. This includes cities and rural communities; the present and the past; oral and visual literature as well as print literature. Driven by required context-specific contextualization, oralities evidence multiple expressions having no hard edges (see Finnegan, 2005). Various examples follow.

Some, like my Ifugao friends, grew up where orality influenced *every* aspect of life. For them, orality is, as someone sagely summarized, "unconscious competence." Most Ifugao are naturals at it; they unconsciously and with great competence know how to "read" people, rooms, and what's written on the wall. They know the social cues, including those of different generations.

In the Ifugao case study, a well-educated youth who spoke at least three languages, could read print and music, still wanted more than the visual taped on the wall; she wanted to hear the *entire* song sung corporately—holism being another strong component of orality—to capture its fullness. A fragmented and fatigued version just didn't cut it. She represents someone, not unlike the author of Revelation (1:11, 19; 19:9; 21:5), who has a deep appreciation for both ear gate, eye gate, and sensory gate.

Others, e.g., a growing number of Americans groomed by social media are unconsciously meandering into orality. Their skills to read people and contexts are growing even as they morph from strong individuality to small communities of kindred spirits e.g., music, sports, food, politics. These digital-AI natives find their oral competence maturing yet different from others.

Many of those strongly immersed in print media, however, view the reintroduction of orality as a step backwards on the evolutionally communication scale. Still others view it as another colonial ploy for control. Afterall, the print-digital-AI world is where it's at; it's hip; it offers a road to a financial future. Returning to the orality of one's grandparents is perceived as old fashion, a dead-end street.

Such thinking, sadly, finds itself in much of theological education. In that literacy is believed to have trumped orality, why waste time giving it any thought? Afterall, the Bible came to us as a printed book. Deal with it! Or did it?

We must not overlook the fact that at some level, *everyone is an oralists*; that "no literate is oralless" (Steffen and Bjoraker, 64). Babies recognize the voice of their mothers immediately when born. Voice, sound, and symbols (shorthand for extended meaning) are never far from God's highest creation throughout their entire lifecycle. Even good Bible translations are not *oralless*.

Does orality offer the discerning a wider window to God?

What is Orality?

Defining orality is like trying to pick up mercury. When you think you have it, it slips away. Simply stated, orality is, "*holistic communication embodied in relationships that create social identities*" (Steffen and Neu 2024, 125 emphasis original). It centers on sound, particularly voice, heard externally and emotionally through the ear gate and heard, sensed, and viewed internally via the theater of one's mind and inner voice.

As holistic communication, orality also centers on symbols, images, among others, captured through the eye gate. The actions one takes from perceptions garnered through the ear-eye-sensory gates create celebrated to criticized social levels (see Thigpen 2020).

Orality's Multi-dimensional Framework

Orality encompasses at least a six-dimensional framework. This complex, holistic, multidimensional, integrative mode of communication minimally incorporates sound, relationships, the sensory, symbols, pictorial images, aesthetics, rational. Such a kaleidoscope of frames deliberately creates ambiguity, elusiveness, forever calling interpreters back for further reflection and application. Orality serves more as a conduit for partial and unfinished meaning than a finished repository for meticulously and systematically laid out conceptual categories.

Orality prefers to begin with concrete relationships (human, spiritual, material) and branch out. A necessary part of this outreach, claims Goold, includes the aesthetic, "For oral learners, art-making is not an optional aesthetic experience. Art is functionally necessary" (2014, 88).

Art also influences interpretation. Hermeneutics is much more than a mechanical process; it also includes an *artistic process*; it is semantics-plus. Part of the plus includes the affective, the sensory, beauty, impact. This requires interpretation to minimally include the ear, eye, and sensory gates. Holistic communication found in orality that pervades Scripture speaks in a polished way, communicating passionately, powerfully, persuasively, even as it offers promises and predictions. Have we needlessly aggrandized print? Not unlike the Trinity, the sacred has a strong artistic component that promotes and requires affective responses.

While print is designed for thinking and analysis, orality is designed for feeling and action. Recall the emotional-based actions of Abraham with Isaac or Rahab with the spies. Their obedience required more than submission and faith, it also required emotion-based action. "Without actions," declares James, "*faith is useless*" (2:17 VOICE emphasis original). Orality conveys meaning through demonstrated emotion-based actions.

Orality marries mood and meaning to the moment and milieu. Wise Bible interpreters are competent art clarifiers.

Expanding the Orality Definition

With this brief background, it's time to thicken the definition of orality: "*By choice or circumstance, multiple variants of orality include a natural, universal, living (socially embodied), holistic (appealing, impactful, multisensory, rational, boundaried) modes of relating and communicating—receiving, reflecting, remembering, rehearsing, relaying—that*

wed ear (sound) and eye (sight) often in an indirect circular spiral or casual fashion, all of which create social identities and ideologies individually and collectively" (Steffen and Neu 2024, 125).

Orality finds individuals and communities traversing an everchanging continuum with literacy and the digital-AI world. Ong called this "residual orality" defined as "habits of thought and expression . . . deriving from the dominance of the oral as a medium in a given culture" (1971, 27-28). Recall the young Ifugao girl's question to the seasoned instructor.

Ong (2002) preferred to see the oral and literate modes of communication as divided, juxtaposed, polarizing, competitive. That perception was soon challenged as they are much more interrelated and interactive than Ong postulated. Viewing these interactive modes of communication as a contentious continuum seems much more realistic.

Ruth Finnegan contends, "the idea that the use of writing automatically deals a death blow to oral literary forms has nothing to support it" (1992, 160). She then points out how writing, just as the oral, includes numerous non-verbal clues for the reader, e.g., "layout, spacing, and orientation" (2005, 173, 174). Bolded and italicized words, symbols such as " ", ?, !, $ —, emojis, also provide the reader additional clues even as calligraphy moves letters into a visual art show. Good writing, like good art, tells a story.

Finnegan continues, noting how computers through color, shapes, icons, moving images, dissolves "the boundaries between picture, writing, and graphic." She correctly concludes whether oral, written, or visual literature, *all* are "multimodal and contextualized" (2005, 174).

Overemphasizing one literature form over another does an injustice to all. Differences does not necessarily mean inferiority. When overlapped, meaning often raises to a higher level. Print, influenced by other media, e.g., music, dance, art, paraphernalia, brings added dimension and depth to lone words. Assigning "top drawer" to a specific mode of communication media is myopic.

Where placed on the oral-print-digital-AI continuum, individually or collectively, can be perceived as honorable to shameful. Many today perceive their worth, identity, approval, safety, or security wrapped up in the ability to read and/or employ the digital/AI world. From exhilarating to devasting, mental consequences result.

For many in the Bible hermeneutic world, orality is the "big forgot" and "the flaw of the excluded voice" (Steffen and Neu 2024, 136). Does Bible interpretation begin with written text? Is the hermeneutic oxygen for the narrative sections of Scripture found squarely in orality? Does minimizing the role of orality (sound, story, symbols, imagination, emotions, relationships, pictorial images, rational) in Scripture minimize meaning and applications? The following five assumptions may reveal some answers.

Five Assumptions Often Minimized

Every hermeneutical theory is driven by biased assumptions. Such assumptions are difficult to recognize because they are the socio-cultural air we breathe.

Erickson claims, "A given hermeneutic will need to be understood as part of a much larger system of thought, and that system will have to be carefully evaluated" (Erickson 1993, 123). Few, however, identify, much less analyze, the assumptions that drive their theoretical hermeneutic framework. With few if any oral apprehensions or alarms, many march blindly forward in cerebral comfort.

Five often unassumed assumptions related to orality in Scripture follow.

Assumption One: The Spoken Word Preceded the Written Word

The spoken word, God's voice, was heard long before being written. "Before time itself was measured, the Voice was speaking. The Voice was and is God." John 1:1 VOICE. God first breathed out words, *not* manuscripts (see Song 2011). Yet *both were God breathed*. God's message to the world did *not* begin with a book.

Both testaments began as shared communal oral tradition. The Synoptic Gospels "were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:2 NIV). Luke "wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1 NIV). Add to these "the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42 NIV) and Paul's instructions (1 Cor 2:13; 11:2, 23; 15:1-3; 1 Thes 2:13, 4:2; 2 Thes 2:15). Authoritative oral tradition preceded authoritative written text.

That Jesus wrote nothing down of his teachings nor asked anyone to do so demonstrates his assumed understanding of oral tradition. For those groomed in print, this may be difficult to grasp. Eye-earwitness oralists, however, could precisely remember Jesus' vivid voiced teachings decades later (Jn 14:26b).

Unfortunately, many of today's Scripture miners have a low view of voice. Karpf notes:

> we have very little collective sense in Western societies of the importance of the voice . . . We persist instead with the idea that the move from a primarily oral to a mainly literate society has made the voice much less important than the image and the written word, as if the voice belonged at the periphery of human experience, rather than at its center (2006, 3).

Kaarpf continues, "Literacy, however, downgrades intonation and our sensitivity to it, preferring to use grammar and syntax to help establish meaning. . . . The arrival of printing and literacy changed the voice's status — *decentered* it from official life" (2006, 200, 201 emphasis added). How much thought have interpreters given to the sounds of Scripture? Have interpreters marginalized voice? Does written text talk?

Hearon observes, "Since these 'written remains' were largely dictated, the 'remains' are, in fact, texts that began in oral expression and were 'actualized' in performance through the reoralization of the words." What results if interpreters overlook the "oral remains?" She continues, "To view them wholly as written texts, then, is to miss an important dimension of their function and to misconstrue how they were experienced in the ancient Mediterranean world" (2004, 97).

Finnegan concludes, "Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a special occasion" (2012, 2). Horsley adds, "We cannot assume that texts were written to be 'studied' and 'interpreted' as in scholarly print-culture" (2010, 97). The spoken word preceded the written word, and both were authoritative.

Assumption Two: Print Blinds Many to Scripture's Oral Features

What blind spots impact the oral features of Scripture? One is the neglect by many in the academy, assemblies, and agencies (3-As) of the foundational role orality had on textual formation and teaching. Our strong print background has blinded and blunted many to the pervasive oral terms related to the ear gate that dot the soil of Scripture: "call," "tell," "teach," "shout," "listen," "hear," "heard," "ear," "voice," "tongue," "said," "speak," "sing," "announce," "proclaim," "preach," "teach," "exhort," "messenger," "word of mouth," "remember."

Since the ear and eye are intrinsically integrated in canon construction, note also the inventory of words associated with the eye-gate: "eyes," "gaze," "guard," "heed," "survey," "examine," "read," "write," "look," "behold," "beware," "worry," "watch," "see," "dreams," "visions."

Sensory terms also connect to orality, e.g., "cry," "tears," "laugh," "taste," "feel," "touch," "pain," "sweet," "sour," "vomit," "lament," "shame," "honor," "grieve," "joy," "smile," "frown," "despair." While we read such terms related to the ear-eye-sensory gates, *few connect them to their oral origins*.

Bible authors not only used multiple oral terms, they also styled their writing in ways conducive to memorization. Matthew, e.g., does so by arranging "things in a way that is easy for the reader to memorize. He arranges things in threes and sevens. There are three messages to Joseph; three denials of Peter; three questions of Pilot; seven parables of the Kingdom in chapter 13; seven woes to the Scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23" (Barclay 1975, 8).

The 3-As neglect by many of the influential role *orality* had on text and teaching also impacts interpretation. Generally, a strong print background blinds and blunts them to the fact that the Bible is "a collection of sacred, religious texts orally composed for eventual oral articulation" (Wendland 2010, 6). The highly print-oriented, therefore, naturally tend to perceive meaning located in written words rather than situational spoken sounds.

Kelber correctly implores, "If [only] we can wean ourselves from the notion that texts constitute the center of gravity in tradition" (1994, 163). Loubser offers reasons for realignment, "Almost by default, most people living in modern literate cultures are 'media blind' . . . . it [oral poetics] goes against the grain of our deep-seated literate inclinations" (2013, 4, 74).

Lewis concurs, "the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors is the categorical barrier between oral and literary structures" (1987, 457). Ryken believes "literary" is a "logical extension" of grammatico-historical[-literary] (1984, 12). Alter adds, "As modern readers of the Bible, we need to relearn something of this mode of perception that was second nature to the original audience" (1981, 62).

Bible communicators often require knowing antiquity's multiple contexts. Part of that context includes knowing how those oralists perceived, interpreted, communicated, implemented, remembered, relayed. It also requires knowing the variations of how oralist discerned truth and persuaded peers.

Assumption Three: The Spoken Word Influenced the Written Word

The spoken word influenced the written word because Scripture was written primarily for the ear. Horsley therefore calls Scripture "oral-derived texts" (1999, 60). A copied text, writes Carr, "stood as a permanent reference point for an ongoing process of largely oral recitation" (2005, 4). Assmann assumes, "Text is speech in the status of a mnemonic mark" (2011, 72). Walton and Sandy conclude, "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" (2013, 176-77).

Scripture became a "sound print" hybrid as the spoken influenced the written and vice versa. The written text, which "never exists without orality" (Ong 2002, 8), protects the spoken-heard text. While in antiquity "Written texts may have been secondary," they "were not discounted altogether" (Walton and Sandy 2013, 237). Sound and script sync well.

Wire distinguishes how this hybrid utilizes both spoken and written. She believes writing "limits a story by recording only words, whereas storytelling depends for effective communication as much on the speaker's tone, volume, pace, gestures and embodiment of direct discourse as on the words spoken" (2004, 100).

Such hybridism means *every* telling requires socio-cultural contextualization. When the storyteller does not make such adjustments, someone will be sure to let him/her know verbally or nonverbally that something is amiss. Even so, the antiquity majority tended to perceive this hybrid as strongly oral in nature. Boundaried-contextualized rhetoric reigned in texts, presentations, hermeneutics, application.

"Thus *says* the Lord" appears some 400 times in the OT. Jesus repeatedly said, "you have heard it *said*." Loubser calls Paul an "oral theologian" (1995, 67) because he generously oralized his written letters. Flemming explains, "Paul's writings are less a collection of doctrinal studies than a series of theological conversations between the apostle and his diverse audiences with their life circumstances" (2005, 105).

Scripture is strongly speech-sourced writing where personalities integrate and augment propositions, characters with concepts, visuals with voice. Influenced predominately by oral audiences, OT and NT authors refused to insist listeners settle for print alone (Harris 1989). Rather, they wisely adjusted the text for the ear, heart, and memory, not just the eye (mind and documents). Some no doubt memorized-performed-read as they re-oralized the dictated text thereby completing the oral circuit.

Spirit-guided ancient authors knew how to make the written assessable to the oral majority; they knew how to ease the tension between script and sound; they knew how to make the "written" word become the "spoken-written" word so that it became credible (Horsley 2010, 98), comprehendible, applicable, memorable, repeatable.

Again, Karpf, "literacy didn't replace orality, only supplemented it" (2006, 204). For the most part, the early Israelites and Christ followers were not given the *written* word of God on perishable parchments, rather, they (and us) received the *spoken-written* word of God. Not to grasp the hybrid nature of Scripture confirms one's blindness to the significant role orality played in influencing, developing, and advancing Scripture.

Maxey summarizes, "The Bible was for the most part created, transmitted, and received in a predominantly oral context" (2009, 1). From foundation to finish, orality fashioned the formation and function of Scripture thereby designing it, not unlike the Trinity, primarily for relationship-based dialogue and action. *Text preserved orality.*

Assumption Four: Not Only did Voice Precede Text, Voice Followed Text

Centuries following written text, voice still played a major role in assuring credibility, interpretation, and communication. Stock synthesizes, "the rules of oratorical discourse invaded the world of texts" (1984, 26). Hearon expands, "Alongside this perception of the text as 'written,' however, is the experience of the written text as, principally, a spoken word that is read aloud, received, and remembered." She continues:

> Equally strong is both the perception and encounter of the text as a living voice that continues to speak to the present . . . The Hebrew Scriptures, therefore, are representative of the complex relationship between written and spoken word. They are perceived of as both written word and spoken word (as having "voice"), yet they are most often encountered and employed as spoken word (2010, 65).

Spoken Voice *refused* to be distant or detached from the written Voice. Written script speaks because it is spoken script! Written scripts are living, speaking scripts; they speak metaphorically! How strongly has our print background *undervalued* speaking and listening in relation to the spoken-written word of God?

Because most ancients assumed sound to be superior to script, reputable teachers relied on memory and mouth, *not* the written text. They also assumed reading should *not* be conducted silently or in solitude. Achtemeier concludes, "Reading was therefore

oral performance *whenever* it occurred and in whatever circumstances. Late antiquity knew nothing of the 'silent, solitary reader'" (1990, 17).

The same was similar for NT times. Reading required: 1) the power of voice which "intones the voice of God through vocal cords," 2) the text *be read out loud* (Acts 8:30; Col 4:16) to hear the "still small voice," (1 Kings 19:12 KJV), 3) be read *in community* as a shared experiential event (Col 4:16; 1 Tim 4:13) (Berger 2003, 38, 47, 99), 4) be heard *in its entirety* (assumes boundaries), and 5) audience feedback (dialogue and debate) throughout.

Antiquity's equivalent for today's printed document was an oral public event where memory, proclamation-performance, dialogue ("creating the tale together" Vansina 1985, 34), deliberation prevailed. Most first-century faithful or fickle followers of "the Way" perceived the word of God *not* as lifeless "print on the page" (Rhoads 2008, 4) but rather as *live* embodied proclamation-performance. Scrolls served as signs—unrelational reminders; the spoken served as relational reminders.

Rhoads raises some poignant questions:

> Can you imagine a musicologist who does nothing but sit in libraries and study the score of a composition without ever hearing a performance of it? Would it not seem strange for interpreters of drama, including ancient Greek drama, to analyze a play apart from interpretations of it in performance? Similarly, does it not seem odd that biblical critics interpret writings that were composed in and for oral performance—as gospels, letters, and apocalypses were—without ever experiencing performances of them and without giving some attention to the nature of the performance of these works in ancient and modern times (2006, 110)?

Teachers shifting from a highly print-dominant culture to become a storyteller means one has applied to become a text performer-proclaimer.

For uninhibited imagination to prevail, some paradigm shifts may be necessary to begin to appreciate the powerful role of performance in antiquity. Rhoads continues, "When we seek to imagine performances in oral cultures, we moderns need to shift our thinking from written to oral, from private to public, from 'public readers' to performers, from silent readers to listeners/audience, from individual to communal audience, and from manuscript transmission to oral transmission" (2006, 123). Performance-proclamation makes it a corporate, memorable event (enacted discourse).

Once print existed, it was never a one-way street even when one media dominated. Tension between the two has always existed. "Oral texts," writes Botha, "depended on writing for their survival while written texts were dependent on those oral aspects for their legitimacy" (2012, xvi). The psalmist adds: "Write this down for the next generation so people not yet born will praise God" Ps 102:18. MSG. The interfacing of the *spoken*-written word prevailed in antiquity, thereby presenting not only pedagogical preferences but also generational preservation.

Nor did the transition from sound to silence happen overnight. As Ong explains, "even after the development of writing, the pristine oral-aural modes of knowledge storage and retrievals still dominate . . . When writing first appeared, it did not immediately wipe out or supplant oral-aural modes of thought and verbalization. Rather it accentuated and codified them" (1977, 214). Literacy, "was used to enhance and facilitate orality" (Dewey 1995, 45). Karpf's summary for today rings true of antiquity, "voice has remained . . . a weapon of mass persuasion" (2006, 213). Viva voice!

Assumption Five: Narratives in Scripture Require Orality for Fuller Emotional Comprehension

What perishes in print? Bible authors wrote not merely to elicit *cerebral clarity*, but also to generate collective *informed action* through *imaginative*[3] and *emotive* impact! Through orality's enhanced experience feature, stories speak, offering a surplus of imaginative-emotional-based appeal, impact, and demonstration that encourages hearers-readers to serve themselves, society, and the Supreme One.

Orality *layers meaning* in multiple ways, one by incorporating the sensory which increases personal-collective emotive impact. Bradt, e.g., believes, "Story knows more as said than can ever be articulated—through indirection, suggestion, tone, and dynamics" (1997, 108). Brown asserts such incorporations do "not denigrate the cognitive elements of a text's message" and that "we are not limited to an either-or choice between cognitive content and noncognitive purposes in texts." Rather, the noncognitive deserves "a fair representation in our discussion of textual meaning" (2021, 6).

Meaning in Scripture is tied not just to "what" is said, but also "how" it is said. This seems to infer the mind follows the heart. Few in the 3-As on the print side of the

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[3] Richard Hays perports "Spirit-led imagination, an imagination converted by the Word, is an essential faculty for the work of theological exegesis" (Hays, 2020, 39).

spoken-written Scripture ledger have been taught to engage in the cinematic nature of Bible *characters* to discover the sensory side of story. Rather, most have been taught to immediately identify the *theological headline*.

Ryken reminds interpreters to *slow down*. Let the lives of characters develop in their fullness so they can capture and critique us. Why? Because Creator sovereignly chose Bible characters to become his talking points and positions. "It's God talk in human-talk" (Sandy 2024, 12). "*What's* the headline?" should be initiated by "*Who's* the headline?"

Can Bible interpreters experience the realities of characters *before* assigning principles? "Truth is experiential," reasons Ryken, "as well as ideational" (Ryken, 2018, 26). Truth is more than *told* ideas or finite facts; it moves beyond the "possible and provable" to include the mysterious visual, sound, senses, and activities of Bible characters.

Ryken and Longman wave this warning flag, "literary texts are irreducible to propositional statements and single meanings. A propositional statement or a theme can never be a substitute or even the appointed goal of experiencing a literary text" (1993, 17). Ryken adds, "a story does not have a unifying topic but a unifying *action*" (2018, 79). Orality is naturally oriented towards a character's sensory-influenced expectations and actions, transporting interpreters beyond principles to piety.

Finnegan digs deeper, "the bare words cannot be left to speak for themselves, for the simple reason that in the actual literary work so much else is necessarily and intimately involved" (2012, 17). Truth goes beyond ancient silent scribbles, syntax, grammar; it requires conversations and actions demonstrated in context. Truth requires movement beyond correct or incorrect to good and evil, beyond mere reflection to observable engagement. As Darrell Bock says, "We were made in the image of God to image God to others."

How could the conversations, conduct, and conflicts of the main characters challenge, confirm, or compound current interpretation? What new questions might emerge?

Theology is conveyed most powerfully and thoroughly when demonstrated through *living relationships*. Until a storied event where relationships reign is grasped, theology tends to remain naked ideas having minimal imaginative, emotional, or transformative appeal or impact. God-imaged characters challenge and change all this.

Focusing exclusively or even minimally on *theological ideas deplatforms, demystifies, deoralizes, devoices, denarratizes, deevents, deenfleshes, deembodies, deexhibits, decenters, decharacherizes, derenders, deabsorbs, and depersonalizes the dominate literary genre of Scripture—narrative. Worse yet, it deincarnates the Chief Character—Jesus—making Him a philosophical Idea rather than a participating Person in the Trinity's ongoing story* (Steffen and Neu 2024, 118).

Conversely, orality presents interpreters with creative tensions that beg for resolution. For example: 1) oral layers and literary layers, 2) concrete relationships that are experiential and abstract rational that is cognitive in nature,[4] 3) dramatic and expository, 4) mystery and facts, 5) practice and theory, 6) reading characters and context and reading grammar, 7) the experienced and the excavated, 8) fragments and holism where divisive "either-or" gives way to the more harmonious and deeper "both-and." Orality swims in an ocean of creative tensions.

Summarizing, orality connects not just people through stories, but also hearts and places. This opens the door for an *army of amateurs* to interpret Bible stories, not just those formally trained!

The spoken-written hybrid Word is foundational to a full-orbed, more robust understanding of Scripture's narratives, and their Author. "The long trail of orality, which for many of us has mostly been hidden from sight, is now difficult not to see" (Sandy 2024, 184).

Illuminating Overlooked Questions

Even though print bias has blinded many Bible interpreters to at least five assumptions surrounding orality, the impaired vision does not end there. It also carries over into the questions asked.

Until something enters one's radar screen, questions remain unasked. Unasked questions retain the status quo. The same is true for orality and Bible interpretation. A Ghanaian proverb is instructive: "The one who asks questions doesn't lose his way."[5]

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[4] Perry Shaw recognizes some changes are required in that "traditional theological education has tended to focus on the development of the mind as the primary mandate of institutional learning. This emphasis finds its roots in Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment. A more theologically grounded understanding of pedagogy recognizes the holistic nature of learning." Shaw, 2014, 29.

[5] https://medium.com/@davidafrica279/ten-african-proverbs-fa4dbfea1ce6. All too often in theological education interpreters are not given permission to be wrong. How could imagination-sourced questions advance the Kingdom?

It is time to ponder some questions that have received too little attention in Evangelical textbooks and therefore hermeneutic classes and home Bible studies around the globe. Following are some questions that should eventually cross an interpreter's radar screen in that they can redefine and reposition current comprehension:

- Did God consider the spoken words of the prophets and apostles of equal weight with later written text?

- How does the *spoken-written* word of God differ from the *written* word of God?

- How did scribes accommodate oral learners?

- What level of oral articulation does Scripture assign itself?

- What are the limits of propositional logic? narrative logic?

- How does science-based hermeneutics hinder interpretation of Scripture's narratives? enhance it?

- What role did performance-proclamation (re-oralizing text) play in communicating Scripture in antiquity?

- How do hearing and reading skillsets differ?

- How has print blinded and blunted interpreters to the significant role of orality in the construction and interpretation of Scripture?

- When does the oral submit to the written? the written submit to the oral?

- How long did it take for written text to gain creditability over oral text?

- When did orality's influence on the written text die?

- What parishes in print?

- How does grammatical-historical differ from grammatical-historical-literary?

- How did ancient audiences anticipate structured verbal and non-verbal oral clues?

- How were texts in antiquity expected to be interpreted?

- How did oral text become written text?

- How does one read Scripture designed to be heard?

- How does the host culture make truth judgments?

- How does the host culture persuade peers?

- If life-changing transformation (theological education) occurred predominately in participatory corporate worship in antiquity, what implications should this have for today?

- What is the cost of minimizing orality in Bible interpretation and communication?

- What is your theology of orality?

- Who on your hermeneutic team has broad oral-artistry skills?

While Bible interpreters may never have all the right answers, the journey begins by asking insightful questions. Are the questions the answers?

Wise Bible interpreters assume finality is overvalued when it comes to asking questions or discerning answers.[6] What other questions would you add?

Focuses and Forays

The five assumptions raise some thought-provoking questions in relation to the composition and communication of Scripture. Do interpreters in the 3-As have a hearing problem? a vision problem? a sensory problem?

Van der Toorn concludes, "the oral does not die, but its authority is subordinate to that of the written text" (2007, 218). As literary tourists blinded by a long literary history, we tend to miss part of the quote—orality's imprint on Scripture *never* dies. We tend to forget Scripture is "oral to the core" (1990, 19). Authoritative biblical texts were written primarily for the collective ear.

Scripture's oral influence ("the big forgot" and "the flaw of the excluded voice") must *never be overlooked or trivialized if interpreters wish to advance beyond mere theological headlines to a fuller, richer grasp* of the spoken-written word of God. Oral residue remains from Alpha to Omega because the Bible is the *spoken*-written word of God. This requires *all* Bible interpreters be grounded in orality which minimally impacts one's hermeneutic, theology, apologetic. Recall the absence of orality in hermeneutic textbooks.

Orality focuses on *how to relate* rather than *what to believe*. This should come as no surprise considering the Trinity's relational nature. Orality has Trinitarian roots.

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[6] After 35 chapters of "advice" from Job's "friends," God again enters the story in the last five chapters. In the concluding 134 verses Revealer *begins* not with corrective advice, *but with a question followed by 60 others*, one of which Job repeats. Did he do this to secure Job's attention so his advice stood a chance to be heard?

Contextualized orality resonates in this "Age of Imagination" (Greene and Robinson 2008, xxxi, 21) since it offers a lonely world the tension between mystery and specifics, the experiential and theoretical, genuine and hollow relationships, characters and cognitive categories. It is time to add some new rungs to our hermeneutic ladder.

Scripture integrates and augments the oral and text. Even so, interpretive start points matter. Respect for the narrative genre implies orality be the initiator. This symbiotic relationship insinuates the added rungs be placed at the *bottom* of the hermeneutic ladder. While the oral does not have the final word, it should have the first.

It is time for an oral/text *continuum* to replace the *seesaw* where text is perceived as up (superior) and orality as down (inferior). Such seesaw misunderstanding creates winners and losers while a continuum creates winners on both sides. Function should supersede mode.

Overlooking or trivializing orality in canon construction, interpretation, or communication diminishes God-intended emotive impact, aesthetics, and meaning. Orality is the flaw for many interpreters coming from book cultures. The hermeneutic oxygen for interpreting Bible narratives, however, is found in orality. Out of respect for the narrative genre and to bless the nations, it's time to add some oral-based interpretive rungs to the bottom of our hermeneutic ladder. This will make interpretation and application much more oral, natural, relational, impactful, communicatable, universal, God focused.

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