

ORALITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES: RECAPTURING AN ANCIENT PARADIGM¹

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Modern scholarly interest in orality began with the writings of Milman Parry in the 1920s and 1930s.² Since that time the literature on the subject has mushroomed. In his 1985 annotated bibliography John Foley listed over 1,800 entries related to oral theory, 1,500 of which stem—directly or indirectly—from Parry’s pioneering work.³ It was only in the 1960s, however, that scholars began to take an active interest in applying oral theory to the biblical documents, with their primary focus on the OT.⁴ It was Werner Kelber’s writings in the late 1970s and early 1980s that served to increase interest in the relationship between oral tradition and the NT documents.⁵ In the 1990s scholars in increasing numbers began to call for a consideration of orality in NT studies.⁶ Nevertheless, most biblical scholars continue to examine the NT documents using presuppositions that apply more to nineteenth and twentieth-century literary/print culture than to the culture in which those documents were originally produced. Before proceeding further, therefore, it will be necessary to give some thought to the nature of first-century culture.

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² Parry’s doctoral thesis, *Les Formules et la métrique d’Homère* (Paris: Société Editrice “Les Belles Lettres,” 1928), was the first of numerous studies on oral poetry, both ancient and contemporary.

³ J. M. Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985).

⁴ E.g. S. Gervitz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963); R. C. Culley, *Oral Formulaic Language in the Biblical Psalms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967); W. Whallon, *Formula, Character, and Context: Studies in Homeric, Old English, and Old Testament Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

⁵ W. H. Kelber, “Mark and Oral Tradition,” *Semeia* 6 (1979) 7–55; *idem*, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). It should be noted that Kelber argued that the written Gospels were not the logical extension of oral tradition but, rather, a counter to it.

⁶ E.g. P. J. J. Botha, “Mute Manuscripts: Analysing a Neglected Aspect of Ancient Communication,” *Theologica Evangelica* 23 (1990) 35–47; P. J. Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity,” *JBL* 109 (1990) 3–27.

I. THE FIRST CENTURY: WHAT SORT OF CULTURE WAS IT?⁷

The discussion of the transition from primary orality to primary literacy has been approached from at least three different perspectives. Eric Havelock's concern is classical Greek culture. He approaches the question using the grid of literacy and proposes a continuum which begins with pre-literate culture and extends through craft-literacy, recitation-literacy, and script-literacy to type-literate culture.⁸ Based on the common appearance of writing in Greece in the last third of the fifth century BC, Havelock places the transition to script-literacy—the ability of the average person to pick up a manuscript and read it—around 450 BC.

The mere appearance of writing, however, does not necessarily mark an immediate transition from a primarily oral culture to a primarily literate culture. Thomas Farrell's study of the Nicene Creed and M. T. Clanchy's study of the development of literacy in medieval England demonstrate that the transition did not happen overnight.⁹ In fact, the work of Henri Marrou and William Stanford suggests that, in Western culture, a date as late as AD 450 might be a more appropriate transition point.¹⁰

Thomas Boomershine's concern is late twentieth-century culture. He takes a broader perspective and proposes five types of culture based on the primary communication medium operative in each: oral culture, manuscript culture, print culture, silent print culture, and electronic culture.¹¹ Boomershine places the shift from oral culture to manuscript culture in the late first century AD. In manuscript culture, traditions are collected and preserved in manuscripts, and public reading of the written manuscript is the primary means of distribution.

Within a concern for culture in general, Walter Ong's focus is specifically on orality.¹² Although he notes three stages in the development of culture—oral, alphabetic/print, and electronic—Ong also argues that varying *degrees* of orality exist within a culture after the introduction of writing. In terms of orality, therefore, cultures within his alphabetic/print stage may be further subdivided into radically oral, largely oral, residually oral, and minimally

⁷ A more detailed discussion of the material in this section may be found in J. D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text. Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 35–59.

⁸ Havelock's writings on the topic are extensive. As a starting point, see E. A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

⁹ T. J. Farrell, "Early Christian Creeds and Controversies in the Light of the Orality-Literacy Hypothesis," *Oral Tradition* 2 (1987) 132–45; M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (trans. G. Lamb; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956) xiv; W. B. Stanford, *The Sound of Greek: Studies in the Greek Theory and Practice of Euphony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967) 3.

¹¹ T. E. Boomershine, "Biblical Megatrends: Towards a Paradigm for the Interpretation of the Bible in Electronic Media," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminary Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 144–57.

¹² As Havelock, Ong has written extensively in his area of expertise. Good starting points are W. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); *idem*, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Mithuen, 1982).

oral.¹³ Ong does not apply his degrees of orality to the development of Western culture, but it seems appropriate to think that first-century culture would have been at least largely—if not radically—oral.

A consideration of these perspectives leads to two observations. First, the transition from primary orality to primarily literacy is gradual and proceeds through a number of stages. Second, orality continues its influence long after the introduction of the alphabet and writing. It seems logical to conclude, therefore, that the NT documents were composed during a period of dynamic interaction between orality and literacy. That interaction may also be inferred from the variety of terms used in attempting to characterize first-century culture.

Along with Boomershine, Joanna Dewey has referred to first-century culture as a *manuscript* culture.¹⁴ Both Kelber and Pieter Botha have used the term *scribal* culture to characterize the same period.¹⁵ Perhaps most helpful, however, is Vernon Robbins' phrase *rhetorical* culture, which he uses to refer to "environments where oral and written speech interact closely with one another."¹⁶ Likewise, Ong has defined rhetorical culture as "culture in which, even after the development of writing, the pristine oral-aural modes of knowledge storage and retrieval still dominate."¹⁷ He continues, "Only during the last half of the second century did a scribal culture . . . begin to dominate the transmission of early Christian literature . . . To impose . . . a scribal environment on the context in which the New Testament gospels initially were written and re-written is a fundamental error."¹⁸

II. FIRST-CENTURY CULTURE AND THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS

If first-century culture was a rhetorical culture, what implications does this fact have for an understanding of the production of the NT documents? The answer to this question must take into account the characteristics of both oral and written composition.

Albert Lord has identified five tendencies of oral expression.¹⁹ First, it is additive rather than subordinate. Second, it is aggregative rather than analytic. Third, it is redundant rather than concise. Fourth, it is conservative rather than creative. Fifth, it is acoustically- rather than visually-oriented.

¹³ In his electronic stage, culture may be considered "secondarily oral."

¹⁴ J. Dewey, "Oral Methods of Structuring Narrative in Mark," *Int* 43 (1989) 33.

¹⁵ W. Kelber, "From Aphorism to Sayings Gospel and from Parable to Narrative to Gospel," *Foundations & Facets Forum* 1 (1985) 23-30; Botha, "Mute Manuscripts" 42.

¹⁶ V. K. Robbins, "Writing as a Rhetorical Act in Plutarch and the Gospels," in *Persuasive Artistry. Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy* (JSNTSup 50; ed. D. F. Watson; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) 145.

¹⁷ W. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) 214.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ A. B. Lord, "Characteristics of Orality," *Oral Tradition* 2 (1987) 54-62; cf. *idem*, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1960) 33.

Examples of each of these tendencies may be seen in the NT documents, but it is sufficient here to note one. Anyone who has read the Gospel of Mark in the original language has been struck by the author's repeated use of the coordinate conjunction *καί*. It sometimes seems as though every independent clause begins with *καί*, while—in contrast—subordinate clauses are relatively rare.²⁰ The same general observation may be made about the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke in that the syntax of those books also tends to be additive rather than subordinate.²¹

It is also true that a largely oral culture promotes the development of memory skills. Those memory skills, however, tend to emphasize *thematic* rather than verbatim recall. Field-based research done by Parry, Lord, and others highlights the fact that although oral poets, for example, may affirm that they sing the same words, no poem is ever performed in precisely the same way twice.²² Ong writes, "Hearing a new story [the singer] does not try to memorize it by rote. He digests it in terms of its themes . . . he then verbalizes it in the formulas or formulaic elements he has in stock."²³ This idea will be explored below, so it is sufficient here to mention as an example the widely-acknowledged thematic groupings of controversy stories in Mark 2:1–3:6 and messianic miracles in Matt 8:1–9:34.

First-century written composition was strongly affected by the economics of the materials used. Both ink and papyrus were expensive. Space, therefore, was at a premium, and efficiency took precedence over beauty. Writing was done in columns with similar numbers of letters, regardless of where words began and ended. Punctuation was occasional at best, and diacritical marks were rare.²⁴

The resulting manuscripts were, at best, a challenge to read. Paul Achtemeier notes that "the visual format of the ancient manuscript—words run together and . . . often abbreviated, no punctuation to indicate sentences or paragraphs—conveyed virtually no information about the organization and development of the content it intended to convey."²⁵ This lack of visual information made it necessary for the reader to sound out syllables and words.

²⁰ An analysis of the account of Jesus' triumphal entry in Mark 11:1–11, for example, yields ten occurrences of *καί*, two occurrences of *δέ*, and five subordinate conjunctions (*ὅτε*, *ἐάν*, *καθώς*).

²¹ The parallel passage in Matthew includes five occurrences of *καί*, seven occurrences of *δέ*, and five subordinate conjunctions; Luke's account has eight occurrences of *καί*, five occurrences of *δέ*, and six subordinate conjunctions. Interestingly, a case can perhaps be made that John's Gospel is somewhat more subordinate than additive and, therefore, reflects a more literate culture (compare John 12:12–19).

²² E.g. Lord, *Singer* 13–29.

²³ Ong, *Presence* 25.

²⁴ See F. G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932; repr. Chicago: Ares, 1980); H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). More generally, see L. Alexander, "Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels," in *The Gospels for All Christians. Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (ed. R. Bauckham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 71–105.

²⁵ Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat" 17.

Reading was, therefore, commonly done aloud. The most frequently cited examples of this phenomenon are Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:30) and—as late as the fourth century—Augustine's amazement over Ambrose's ability to read silently (*Confessions* 6.3).

Likewise, although it was not the only method used, dictation was the primary means of composition. Dio Chrysostom, for example, maintained that dictation was easier than doing his own writing (18.18), and Cicero cited several reasons for dictating letters (*Ad Quint.* 2.2.1; 2.16.1; 3.3.1; 3.1.19). This widespread practice of dictating served both to reflect and to reinforce the oral component of first-century culture. Oral compositional techniques such as ring-composition, parallelism, and the repetition of sounds occur regularly in first-century documents. As Augustine Stock writes, "the rules of oratorical discourse invaded the world of texts."²⁶ Furthermore, a cultural bias in favor of orality was reinforced. Seneca, for example, criticizes one author's style because "he was writing those words for the mind rather than for the ear" (*Ep. Mor.* 100.2).

If, therefore, first-century culture was a rhetorical culture, a mixture of orality and literacy was present. The culture was no longer a primarily oral culture; yet it was not a fully literate culture either. In Ong's terms, it was largely—or perhaps radically—oral. Despite the introduction of the Greek and Roman alphabets, a premium was placed on the spoken word. Speeches were given aloud; reading was done aloud; even writing was done aloud. Oral composition was the rule, not the exception. Memory skills were well developed but tended to be thematic rather than verbatim. Poetry and story were used to conserve tradition rather than create it.²⁷ It was a culture quite different from that of the late twentieth century, which formed the backdrop for the academic preparation most of us experienced and in which the higher critical methods of a silent print, literate culture reigned supreme.

Can an awareness of orality offer any new insights for the interpretation of the biblical documents? Given the fact that first-century culture was a rhetorical culture and given the characteristics of such a culture, is it possible that adopting first-century presuppositions will lead us to different conclusions when we consider certain difficulties raised by nineteenth and twentieth-century scholarship? Can recapturing the ancient paradigm of orality provide a "way forward" for twenty-first century biblical studies? Two issues in NT interpretation will serve as brief case studies.

III. THE INTEGRITY OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

A consideration of introductory matters related to Paul's letter to the Philippians must inevitably address the question of that letter's integrity:

²⁶ A. Stock, "Chiastic Awareness and Education in Antiquity," *BTB* 14 (1984) 26.

²⁷ See Havelock, who concludes that poetry was "first and last a didactic instrument for transmitting the tradition" (*A Preface to Plato* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963] 29).

is it a single letter or a composite?²⁸ Although the note of thanks in 4:10–20 is sometimes seen as a third letter, discussion more frequently revolves around whether or not 3:1–4:9 is a self-contained fragment which has been inserted into the original letter.²⁹

Three arguments—primarily related to content—have traditionally been offered in support of such an insertion. First, it is argued that there is a drastic change in tone from the first part of the letter. Second, it is argued that the opponents in chapter 3 differ from those in chapters 1 and 2. Third, it is argued that “finally” (τὸ λοιπὸν) in 3:1 suggests that the end of the letter has been reached. A further, literary, argument which is frequently offered for viewing the letter as a composite is the similarity in wording between 3:1 and 4:4. For the purposes of this case study the scope of the discussion will be limited to this latter argument.

Paul opens 3:1 with the command, “Finally, my brothers, keep on rejoicing in the Lord.” That command is repeated with emphasis in 4:4: “Keep on rejoicing in the Lord; again I will say, keep on rejoicing.” Faced with the similarity between these two verses Walter Schmithals, for example, writes, “Verses 3:1 and 4:4 fit together so exactly that upon sober reflection one must come to the conclusion that a later hand has pulled the two verses apart.”³⁰ He continues by arguing that the second part of the verse (“To be writing the same things to you is not troublesome for me, but is a safeguard for you”) also belongs to the original letter and refers to Paul’s repeated admonitions to rejoice in 1:25; 2:18; and 2:28–29.³¹ The result is that “the thread of the epistle which is interrupted in 3:1 is again taken up abruptly in 4:4.”³² The thread of Paul’s discussion is, indeed, resumed at 4:4. Is there, however, an alternative solution which is at least as plausible as Schmithals’ “cut and paste” literary explanation? I would propose that such a solution lies close at hand in the oral compositional technique of ring-composition.

Ring-composition is the technique in which a speaker or writer “returns to a previous point in the discussion, either concluding or resuming the

²⁸ D. E. Garland has an excellent summary of the arguments for and against the integrity of Philippians (“The Composition and Unity of Philippians: Some Neglected Literary Factors,” *NovT* 27 [1985] 144–59). It is interesting to note that several of the “literary factors” which he highlights are, in fact, oral-aural techniques of composition.

²⁹ The precise limits of the fragment are disputed; for a summary, see Harvey, *Oral Patterning* 239, note 29. For an example of a scholar who argues that 4:10–20 is a separate letter, see J. L. White, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter: A Study in the Letter-Body in the Non-Literary Papyri and in Paul the Apostle* (SBLDS 2; Missoula, MT: University of Montana Press, 1972) 45.

³⁰ W. Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics* (trans. J. E. Steely; Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 72.

³¹ Otherwise the original letter read: “Finally, my brothers, keep on rejoicing in the Lord; keep on rejoicing in the Lord; again I will say, keep on rejoicing”—which is redundant in the extreme, even for Paul. Such an understanding, however, is by no means certain. Gerald Hawthorne, for example, writes, “In reality v 1b is enigmatic, and one cannot be absolutely certain about its meaning” (G. F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* [Waco: Word, 1983] 124). Compare M. Silva, *Philippians* (Chicago: Moody, 1988) 171; P. T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 350–52.

³² Schmithals, *Gnostics* 72.

train of thought.”³³ The framing is done with sentences, and the extent of the section framed varies from a few lines to many pages. Furthermore, ring-composition may be either *inclusive*—using the same sentences to begin and end the section which they frame—or *anaphoric*—repeating a sentence to resume a discussion interrupted by the section framed. In either case, both sentences use some form of the same words. Herodotus, for example, used the technique repeatedly in his *Histories* to frame material as short as one section or as long as an entire book.

Rather than assuming that—at an unknown point in time—a hypothetical redactor decided to pull apart two verses of Paul’s original letter in order to insert a hypothetical letter fragment, would it not be more natural to see the second command to rejoice in 4:4 as an instance of anaphoric ring-composition by which Paul brought his listeners back to the point at which he had broken off in 3:1? In Rom 5:12–21, for example, Paul demonstrates that he is capable of combining *anacoluthon*, digression, and anaphoric ring-composition in the same paragraph. His overall argument in Romans 5–8 is tied together by variations on the confessional phrase “through our Lord Jesus Christ” in 5:1, 11, 21, 6:23, 7:25, and 8:39. The first and last occurrences of this phrase serve as inclusive ring-composition to frame that argument. Nearly identical to Phil 3:1 and 4:4 are 1 Cor 12:31 and 14:1, where the repeated command “keep on being zealous with regard to spiritual gifts” serves as anaphoric ring-composition to frame Paul’s poem to love in chapter 13.³⁴ Is it more natural to explain the similarity between Phil 3:1 and 4:4 in terms of twentieth-century editorial practices or in terms of first-century rhetorical practices?

IV. LITERARY INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE “SYNOPTIC PROBLEM”

One of the virtually assured conclusions of modern NT study is that the similarity between the Synoptic Gospels is best explained by a theory of literary interdependence. Robert Stein, for example, identifies four arguments for such a solution. First, the wording of the accounts of individual events is often identical. Second, the order in which the events are recorded is often lengthy and precise. Third, there are identical parenthetical comments in places such as Matt 24:15 and Mark 13:14. Fourth, the writer of the third Gospel acknowledges that “other narratives” were written before his (Luke 1:1–4).³⁵ Of these four arguments, Stein views the second—agreement in order—as the “most important.”³⁶ Each will be addressed briefly, with special attention given to the argument from agreement in order.

³³ Harvey, *Oral Patterning* 103. The additional details in this paragraph are taken from the same source; examples from Herodotus may be found on pages 65–67.

³⁴ It is interesting to note that although Hans Conzelmann finds the transitions at the beginning and end of 1 Corinthians 13 to be “harsh” (*I Corinthians* [trans. J. W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975] 215, 233) and C. K. Barrett thinks that they are “awkward” (*A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [New York: Harper and Row, 1968] 297), neither argues that the chapter is a redactional insertion.

³⁵ R. H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 29.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 43.

Before addressing Stein's arguments, however, it will be helpful to summarize an article by Kenneth Bailey in which he explores oral tradition in twentieth-century Middle Eastern culture.³⁷ Bailey identifies three forms of oral tradition. The first, *informal uncontrolled oral tradition*, has no identifiable teacher, no identifiable student, and no structure in which material is transmitted.³⁸ It is represented by Middle Eastern rumor transmission. The second, *formal controlled oral tradition*, has a clearly identified teacher, a clearly identified student, and a clearly identified block of material which is memorized and passed on.³⁹ It is represented by the memorization of the Qur'an by Muslim sheiks or the memorization of extensive liturgies in Eastern Orthodoxy.

Between these two forms of transmission is what Bailey calls *informal controlled oral tradition*.⁴⁰ It is informal in its setting—often the gathering of villagers in the evening for the telling of stories and the recitation of poetry—and there is no set teacher or specifically identified student. The transmission of the material, however, is controlled by the community using three levels of flexibility. There is *no* flexibility in the recitation of poems or proverbs, and there is *total* flexibility in the telling of jokes and casual news.⁴¹ Between these two poles is a level of flexibility which allows for *some* individual interpretation of the tradition.⁴² Into this latter category fall parables, stories, and historical narratives important to the life of the community. The teller is permitted a degree of flexibility to reflect his/her own style and interests, but the main lines of the story cannot be changed. Bailey concludes by noting that the Synoptic Gospels include primarily the same literary forms preserved by this sort of oral tradition.⁴³

So, what of Stein's arguments for literary interdependence between the Synoptic Gospels? Stein himself undermines the argument from agreement in wording when he concludes that "the exactness of wording . . . argues for some sort of a common source, *either oral or written*, that lies behind the similarities of the synoptic Gospels."⁴⁴ Since first-century culture was a largely oral culture, since it is commonly acknowledged that memory skills are highly developed in oral cultures, and since some degree of oral transmission in the period prior to the writing of the Gospels is acknowledged by nearly every NT scholar, why should the probability of a common *written* source be given greater weight than that of a common *oral* source?

The argument from agreement in parenthetical material is more difficult, but although the comments in Matt 24:15 and Mark 13:14 assume that

³⁷ K. E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991) 34–54.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 36. This form of oral tradition is the sort proposed by R. Bultmann (*Jesus and the Word* [New York: Scribners, 1958]).

³⁹ Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition" 37. This form of oral tradition is the sort proposed by B. Gerhardsson (*Memory and Manuscript* [Lund: Gleerup, 1961]).

⁴⁰ Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition" 40.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 42, 45.

⁴² *Ibid.* 42–45.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 50.

⁴⁴ Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 34; emphasis added.

those Gospels will be read, their presence does not demand that they stem from a common source or—if such a source is assumed—that it was written. Is it not possible that such parenthetical comments stem from a recognition in the informal controlled oral tradition that some of Jesus' statements were difficult to understand, a recognition which Matthew and Mark incorporated into their written accounts?

Regarding Luke 1:1–4, Stein writes that “the Lukan prologue argues for the fact that Luke, at least, used written materials in the composition of his Gospel.”⁴⁵ Although it is clear that the author of the third Gospel intended to “write in order” (καθεξῆς . . . γράψαι), it is by no means certain that the work of others in “compiling an account” (ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν) refers to written narratives or, more specifically, that the author's act of “following all things carefully from the beginning” (παρηκολουθηκóτι ἄνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς) indicates that he based his own work on those written narratives as Stein assumes. In fact, the latter phrase seems to refer more naturally to careful research into the order of the events delivered by “the eyewitnesses and attendants of the word” (οἱ . . . αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρεταὶ . . . τοῦ λόγου).⁴⁶ In any event, even if *access to* written materials is granted, such access does not necessarily demand literary *dependence* on those materials. Nor does it necessarily point to a common written source behind all three Synoptic Gospels.

It is the agreement in order among Matthew, Mark, and Luke that, for Stein, provides the strongest argument for literary interdependence.⁴⁷ “It is apparent,” he writes, “that although an Evangelist may at times depart from the common order of the accounts, he nevertheless always returns to the same order.”⁴⁸ This common order points to a common source. He continues, “Memorizing individual pericopes, parables, and sayings, and even small collections of such material is one thing, but memorizing a whole Gospel of such material is something else.”⁴⁹ The common source, therefore, must have been written.

Is Stein's conclusion based on agreement in order valid? His argument may be stated in terms of a logical syllogism:

- Major premise: There is a common source behind the Synoptic Gospels.
 Minor premise: Memorizing long portions of material in a given order is highly unlikely.
 Conclusion: The common source must have been written.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 42.

⁴⁶ Bailey raises the interesting point that Luke speaks of “attendants of *the word*,” implying that the reference is to the *oral* transmission of the tradition (“Informal Controlled Oral Tradition” 50).

⁴⁷ Stein actually collapses his argument from Luke 1:1–4 into the argument from agreement in order when he concludes that portion of his chapter with the statement, “The common agreement in Luke's ‘narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us’ with the other synoptic Gospels strongly suggests the use of a common source” (*Synoptic Problem* 42).

⁴⁸ Ibid. 34.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 43.

When the argument is so stated, it is clear that the conclusion follows only if the minor premise holds. Does it? Evidence from a consideration of orality suggests that it does not. First, research by Parry, Lord, and others has demonstrated that members of oral cultures entrusted with the important traditions of their group are capable of internalizing and reciting epic poems of great length.⁵⁰ Second, Bailey's research on informal controlled oral tradition indicates that the basic flow of historical narratives which are central to the community is extremely important. Third, as Bailey also notes, although the basic flow of a narrative must be maintained, the order of scenes within that flow may be varied.⁵¹ Fourth, memorization in an oral culture tends to be thematic.

Not only does this evidence call Stein's minor premise into question, it also goes a considerable way toward explaining the data of the Synoptic Gospels. If the "eyewitnesses and attendants of the word" were members of a culture in which—to use Ong's words—the pristine oral-aural modes of knowledge storage and retrieval still dominated, does that fact not explain the existence of an extended, coherent account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection? If, in oral transmission, the basic flow of narratives central to the life of a community cannot be changed, does that fact not explain why the writers of the first three Gospels always return to the same order of events? If the order of scenes within that overall flow may be varied, does that fact not explain the presence of special "M" and "L" material as well the differences in order which *do* exist between Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Finally, if memorization in oral cultures tends to be thematic rather than verbatim, does that fact not explain the thematic grouping of some material as well as the similarities and the differences in wording which exist among the three Gospels? On an initial reading of the evidence, it seems—to me, at least—that a common oral source is at least as plausible a solution to the "Synoptic Problem" as one which is based on literary interdependence and which, in many forms, includes reliance on the existence of—to use a course title from the school where I did my doctoral studies—"The Hypothetical Document Q."⁵²

V. CONCLUSION

Boomershine has pointed out that contemporary culture is experiencing a paradigm shift from silent print culture to electronic culture. For some of us, that shift is not a particularly comfortable one. "Dot Com" sounds as though it should be a lady's name not her address. "Road Runner" is a character in a cartoon, not an Internet provider. "Snail mail" and faxes will somehow always seem more reliable than e-mail. We are more at home in a library than in front of a computer screen. We would rather use a worn-out

⁵⁰ It is interesting to consider that Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were, most likely, oral poems which were committed to written form around 600 BC.

⁵¹ Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition" 44.

⁵² The discussion of "Q" is outside the scope of this brief article.

concordance than run an electronic word search. We cling tenaciously to our books and shake our heads when we see our students reading the classics from their Palm Pilots. Perhaps we recognize *some* value in all of this new technology, but we will never be completely comfortable with it. We also recognize that men and women who *are* comfortable with that technology sometimes have difficulty understanding why we do things the way we do.

It is precisely this paradigm shift that should cause us to rethink our approach to the biblical documents. Many of the so-called “assured results” of modern OT and NT scholarship are based on presuppositions more appropriate to the silent print culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than to the rhetorical culture in which the documents were produced. It is time we recognize that we sometimes impose our ways of thinking and composing on the biblical authors. It is time we give closer attention to the techniques of communication which existed—and continue to exist—in strongly oral cultures. It is time we recapture the ancient paradigm of orality as one of our tools for biblical studies.