

HEAR YE

D. BRENT SANDY

FOREWORD BY JOHN H. WALTON

WHAT
WE MISS
IF WE
ONLY
READ

THE
BIBLE

LORD

OF THE

THE WORD



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PROPOSITION 1

ORAL CULTURE CAN BE A LOST WORLD

We were never born to read.

MARYANNE WOLF

IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT WORDS. In place of babies' first words, endless gurgling. In place of people conversing, a few hand signals. In place of broadcasts and podcasts, silence. Actually, according to Genesis 1, in place of us, a blank canvas—a world without form, and void (Gen 1:2). We wonder, would even God be the same without words (Jn 1:1)?

The reality is, words are part and parcel of who we are. But what if words are only oral? Nothing inscribed on rock, potsherds, or page. Imagine trying to get along in today's world without reading and writing—and texting!

The French have a common expression, “Je n'ai qu'une parole,” which literally translated is “I have only one word.” It's not that they know only one word. The point is the same as when we say in English, “I give you my word.” Or we can also say, “I'll take your word for it.” In either case, the spoken word is enough, writing unnecessary. (Note that different words can convey the same idea, and they can point to a function beyond what appears on the surface.)¹

¹For example, most of us would understand, “The store is closing in five minutes” to be more than a statement of fact. We've been around stores enough to know that for shoppers and probably store

Jesus declared that “yes” or “no” is all that’s needed in certain situations (Mt 5:37). More than that, he considered the words he spoke—inspired by no less than the Father himself, and backed by his actions—to be adequate for the most important exchange of information of all time: his own divine revelation (Jn 8:28; 12:50).

For most of us, that doesn’t compute. If we didn’t have the truth in written form, especially the words of Jesus, which we can scrutinize, memorize, plaster on the wall—we’d feel slighted, shortchanged, even unsure about what the revelation was all about. After all, aren’t reading and writing an obvious advancement over the oral alternative?

But not so fast. Plato (fourth century BC) and other ancient philosophers questioned the value of written words in place of oral ones, especially for communicating important ideas. Socrates (fifth century BC) and the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (second century AD) are examples of Greco-Roman philosophers who wrote nothing when they surely could have. We only know about their philosophies through what their students recorded. Why? Because they considered teaching via written words inadequate.

In what ways? We won’t understand all the reasoning, since most of us are deeply immersed in the culture of reading and writing. But for them, personal interaction and give-and-take with students was essential for communicating profound concepts. And since reading skills and backgrounds varied, teachers could not count on the ideas expressed in writing to be adequately understood by all readers. Even more, if students had written versions of a philosopher’s thinking, they might not read carefully and think through the concepts sufficiently, missing important parts. Students might also neglect the necessary step

employees as well, the words would summon the hearers to do something. But if we were not familiar with the culture of stores, we may entirely miss the function of the statement. Thus, to understand what people say—or even to understand what we read in the Bible—it’s essential to see that the words in a sentence (the locution) are likely to have an intent (an illocution) and a preferred response (the perlocution). For discussion, see John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 41–42; for more thorough treatment see Richard S. Briggs, “The Uses of Speech-Act Theory in Biblical Interpretation,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 9 (2001): 229–76.

of applying philosophy to their life situations, something philosophers could better encourage in face-to-face discussions.²

Nonetheless, some philosophers did write (Aristotle and Epictetus) and sought to recreate in written form ways they would orally lead students into deep discussions. The result was the dialogue and symposium forms of philosophical essays. Plato is a case in point. All but two of his twenty-seven writings were dialogues. The essays featured dramatic argumentation with hypothetical participants discussing philosophical issues.³

For examples of an oral preference in more recent times, we could explore numerous cultures around the world.⁴ In the case of early Americans in our country, “To native people, oral speech was more trustworthy than written words. . . . Writing could not make language more truthful or promises more binding.”⁵

Or as reported by one of my former students ministering in Cameroon:

During something like a boundary dispute, though the traditional council of the village has long since begun writing court verdicts in a log, often they will still bring all the concerned parties and any available elders out to the site of the dispute, regardless that the issue had previously been settled and recorded. Then, on location, a heated discussion will commence, concluding in a consensus which becomes the verdict. Quite interesting considering boundary disputes in America are settled by data in filing cabinets at city hall.⁶

²From a modern perspective, when we think about email and other digital communications increasingly replacing personal conversations, we can see a tie-in with ancient philosophers’ reservations about written words. Face-to-face communication can be more effective with facial expression, tone of voice, body language, clarification, and feedback. Written and digital communications may have advantages in some respects, but they have limitations.

³For Plato’s contribution to understanding oral culture and the changes writing introduced, see especially Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

⁴See, e.g., Tom Steffen and William Bjoeraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics: As Good Today as It Was for the Hebrew Bible and First-Century Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

⁵This statement appears on a placard at the Native American Museum in Washington, DC.

⁶For studies of oral culture in Africa, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Isadore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992).

For an example of the preference for oral accounts of what Jesus said and did, note what an early Christian said a century after the time of Jesus, even though by then there were written accounts of Jesus and his disciples' lives. Papias preferred hearing over reading: "I do not believe that things out of books are as beneficial to me as things from a living and enduring voice."⁷

In other words, literacy isn't the panacea of perfect communication; never was, never will be, certainly not across all time, in all situations, for everyone. Humanity from the beginning was a society of social interaction with orality as the bedrock of interpersonal relations; thus textuality was unnecessary. (*Orality* refers to anything pertaining to spoken communication; *textuality* refers to written communication.) It was a collectivist culture in which speaking and hearing were the norm. The human brain was prewired for it; children growing up today still catch on fast. As research demonstrates, "we were never born to read."⁸

Reading and writing, on the other hand, took centuries to develop . . . and takes years to acquire; some of us are still learning the art of writing. The brain actually had to rewire itself for the advanced technology. "More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness."⁹ But once it did, it's difficult to retrace the steps back into oral ways of thinking. The Western paradigm of textuality—the "default setting"—stands in the way.¹⁰ Most of us are

⁷Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.4.

⁸"Human beings invented reading only a few thousand years ago. And with this invention, we rearranged the very organization of our brains, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think." Marianne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: Harper, 2007), 3; regarding reading not being a naturally occurring human instinct, see also Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997), 342.

⁹Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 78. Various scholars agree on this point: "the natural human being is not a writer or a reader but a speaker and a listener." See Eric Havelock, "The Oral-Literate Equation: A Formula for the Modern Mind," in *Literacy and Orality*, ed. D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20. "Reading can only be learned because of the brain's plastic design, and when reading takes place, that individual brain is forever changed, both physiologically and intellectually." See Wolf, *Proust and the Squid*, 5.

¹⁰"The literary mindset ('default setting') of modern Western culture prevents those trained in that culture from recognizing that oral cultures operate differently." James D. G. Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003): 139.

very comfortable in our textual skin and the culture of individualism.¹¹ We write alone, we read alone—typically.

ADJUSTING THE DEFAULT SETTING

It comes down to this. What we do with words—whether oral, written, printed, or digital—affects how we use our faculties, how we relate to people, how we spend our time, and most important, how we think.¹² The cultures of hearing and reading are not the same; there can be different ways of being and doing, calling on distinct functions of our brains. Which means, to understand Scripture correctly, it's essential to recognize how reading differs from hearing.

The farther apart, then, the worlds of hearing and reading are, the less those in one world will understand the other. And particularly, the less they will understand the communications of the 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.”¹³

This brings us to the challenge we face in this book. Not orality versus literacy, as if one is better than the other; but there are differences. Not hearing versus reading; there is room for both. Not that oral and written communication are opposites—as if there's a “great divide”; there is interface between them.¹⁴ But being twenty-first century

¹¹The weight holding us back is “a merciless captivity to an unrelenting master—the individualism of our culture and its expectations.” Thomas M. Stallter, *The Gap Between God and Christianity: The Turbulence of Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2022), 3.

¹²Regarding the megatrend of the digital revolution rewiring our brains, see the comments in Walton and Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture*, 11; See also John Dyer, “The New Gutenberg: Bible Apps Could Be as Formative to Christian History as the Printing Press,” *Christianity Today* 66.9 (December 2022): 51-55; for a full treatment, see Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (New York: Harper, 2019).

¹³Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 55; cited in Werner H. Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 17.

¹⁴The “Great Divide” refers to the consensus today that earlier conclusions about the sharp differences between what is spoken versus written went too far; see Rafael Rodríguez, “Great Divide,” in *The Dictionary of the Bible and Ancient Media* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 163-64; and Raphael Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

readers born and groomed in modern textual culture, can we sufficiently understand the meaning of documents originating in ancient oral culture simply by reading them?

More specifically, for biblical interpreters, if the culture was predominantly oral in which the supreme revelation of all time was birthed, formed, and transmitted—and it was—and if oral culture left an indelible mark on written Scripture, including its words, forms, and structures—and it did—and if its authors were writing on the assumption that people would hear what they wrote—and they were—what might that mean for how we read and interpret the Bible in colleges and seminaries, churches and Sunday school classes, and everywhere in between?

It can be a catch-22, seeking to understand a text—which was designed to be heard—without hearing it. Shouldn't we learn as much as possible about oral culture lest we misinterpret Scripture out of blindness to the very nature of Scripture? Isn't it our moral responsibility to do so?

*It can be a catch-22,
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without hearing it.*

To be sure, the most important issue is not *how* God revealed, but *what*. The storehouse of eternal truths, whether preserved orally or in written form, is what matters most. But the *how* can influence the ways in which the *what* was presented and is properly understood. The medium and the message are inseparable.¹⁵

¹⁵“The medium is the message”; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7.

CLARIFICATIONS

Now you may have doubts about some of what has been stated so far. Maybe you're not ready to rethink ways you have always understood the Bible. If so, no worries. Keep reading. What we've said up to this point is a preview of more to come and a simplified version of what's ahead. Hopefully, if you stay the course all the way to the end, you'll agree with the conclusions. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know.

There is something that needs to be set straight straightaway. The Bible in our hands certainly appears to be a fully textual product. The books were written; they were collected into a canon of sixty-six books; the Bible was printed; we can read it. What else do we need to know?

Well, divine revelation did eventually take on the form of textuality, but it wasn't that way at the outset. The initial culture into which God spoke was functionally oral. In those days, people knew of written documents, but only a limited number could read, and fewer still could write. As will become clearer as we proceed, it was a "text-possible-yet-hearing-prevalent society."¹⁶

The verses of Scripture quoted throughout this book are present for a reason. Readers may feel free to skip everything else, but don't ignore the word of the Lord. God has spoken and it's up to us to hear and heed him, otherwise—as in the days of the prophet Isaiah—he may judge us with deafness and blindness:

*Keep on hearing; but may you not understand;
keep on seeing; but may you not perceive.*

¹⁶Walton and Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture*, 19-21, 85, 92, 136; it's also been called "a residually oral culture"; Walter 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), xiv. Eric Eve comments that there is a "seeming paradox that the first-century Mediterranean world was both one in which texts proliferated and played a highly significant role, and also one in which oral habits still predominated." Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 10; the community that preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls is an example of an oral-textual society (see Proposition 7 below for discussion).

*Make the heart of these people hard—
their ears closed,
and their eyes shut. (Is 6:9-10)*¹⁷

So here's the strategy for this book: (1) to explore what the Bible itself reveals about the culture in which it was formed, with textuality under the influence of orality; (2) to reckon with the oral impact on the composition and transmission of Scripture; (3) to learn from recent research about ancient oral culture; (4) to investigate the Gospels as testing ground for the impact of oral culture on divine revelation; and (5) to rethink our reading of Scripture so we can come closer to hearing it as the original audiences did.

The underlying question is, Is it time for a paradigm shift in the interpretation of Scripture? Are we missing something if we only read it? Is there a dynamic in hearing Scripture that's less present in reading it?

Sounds like we have our hands full. Actually, we'll be skipping some topics that are clearly pertinent. It would be useful to know how the brain functions differently when hearing and reading and what that means for different ways of thinking. But we'll leave that up to brain scientists.¹⁸

It would be helpful to live in an oral culture somewhere in the world in order to experience that unique way of life ourselves. But we'll have to depend on second-hand insights from people who have been immersed in oral cultures, as well as from social scientists who study such cultures.¹⁹

Clearly, we will not solve all the issues raised in this book. They are above my paygrade, and it will require a village to sort them all out

¹⁷The author's translations are italicized throughout this book; the translations are intended to convey the meaning of verses in light of the surrounding context.

¹⁸See, e.g., Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (New York: Viking, 2009).

¹⁹For authors thoroughly acquainted with oral culture, see especially Steffen and Bjoraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics*; in addition, note the International Orality Network, the Orality Institute, and the *Orality Journal*.

and construct a way forward. But failing to engage carefully with the evidence for biblical orality—or worse, mindlessly ignoring the evidence—could be like someone who plays tennis well thinking they can play the game of baseball with the same rules and objectives. A baseball coach might say to the tennis player, “Don’t try to put spin on the ball; do your best to hit it straight, preferably through the gap, and as far as possible.”

Likewise, a cultural intelligence coach might say to a textual interpreter, “Don’t try to understand a statement simply as words printed on a page; do your best to understand it as it was originally heard.”

But first things first.

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