

The Spoken Word of God

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In this article, I will explore the different perspectives that an oral-based culture has from a text-based one with regard to the Biblical record. I think that this is important because our modern Western culture tends to value the text as authoritative in itself, rather than consciously recognising that its authority is primarily vested in the God who *spoke* to his people and who delegated his authority to those who were empowered to speak for him, those like Moses, the prophets, and ultimately, Jesus. The text is then a record of such interactions which allowed transmission to future generations. Because we have the *textual* record of all those words, we tend to forget that the spoken word came first.

However, the *spoken* word was of primary importance in the ancient Near East of the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament. I have found that in recognising this, I have been better able to focus on the authority vested in Jesus as *the* Word of God, while acknowledging the written text as the *medium of transmission* to us of the words spoken.

So, my purpose here is not to question the validity of the Bible's claim to be the message from God, but rather to take it as a given that it is, and to instead focus on the primacy of the oral communication which preceded the written record that we have today.

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God **said**.... (Gen 1:1-3)*

Here we are at the beginning of the biblical narrative, and we are told right away that God initiated all things by the *spoken* word. His creative acts are generated by his spoken word, and as he continues to interact with his creation he does so through that same spoken word. He speaks to the patriarchs, to Moses, to David, and to – and through – the prophets. He speaks to women and to men, to children, and to the aged. Perhaps the only words that he wrote were those on the

tablets of stone which he gave to Moses to take to the people. And those were also first spoken to Moses.

And God *spoke* the living word, the oral word, not the textual, to us too, in and through his son, Jesus, as we are told in Hebrews.

*In the past God **spoke** to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has **spoken** to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful **word**. (Heb 1:1-3)*

In the ancient world, the method of communication was by mouth, verbally passing on a message, or a story, or a tradition, or a royal decree. It was a hearing, speaking, listening culture and the passage of communication was slow – by a messenger on a horse, by cart, or by foot. The message may have varied somewhat: it may not always have comprised the exact words of the original message every time it was repeated but the core message and its intent were faithfully transmitted to the hearers. Few people had access to written texts, which were confined to palaces and temples, and later, to monasteries, archives, and libraries of the wealthy. The great storytellers were highly sought after, traveling around telling the epic stories and poems of the regions as people gathered around to listen. Community history was the responsibility of the elders who shared the old stories ‘around the campfire’.

It is estimated that less than 10% of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds were literate, and this continued through the ensuing centuries. But literacy itself does not imply that textual authority is given supremacy over the authority of oral tradition and communication. People may well have the capacity to read and write but still value the oral tradition over the text, as we shall see. Literacy was the domain of the elite few: the king, some of his officials, priests, and scribes. And writing was an expensive business, with the education of scribes and the elite paid for by the state. Written records were thus created as archives of state and temple, as well as to encode the authority of the king on to monuments and buildings.

This state of affairs continued until the 15th century, when Gutenberg radically changed things. He was the first European to invent moveable type for printing, and this allowed the mass production and dissemination of printed texts. This was a driving force for the

Reformation, allowing the widespread availability of the writings of Luther and other Protestant preachers. Prior to this, the sacred texts of the church, including the Bible, had been laboriously and expensively hand-copied, or inked from carved woodblocks, and kept in a few libraries, particularly those of monasteries.

The widespread availability of texts spurred the drive to literacy for all people and so, in the post-Gutenberg world, texts became very important for the sharing and dissemination of information by ordinary folk. Such information was accurately and quickly reproducible and fixed in form. Skills in memorization and oral storytelling died out as books took their place. Communal storytelling was replaced by solitary reading. Of course, our access to information in the computer age is instantaneous and unlimited, and none of it has to be memorized and kept in our brains! Yet which of us does not enjoy a story told orally, with passion, drawing us in to the magic of the narrative?

Besides this difference in communication, whether it is oral or textual, there is a second difference that is also important. An oral-based culture is concerned with communicating a core authoritative spoken *message*, while a textual culture focuses on maintaining a correct authoritative written *text*. In our modern text-based culture, the original written text is regarded as the one which is the most authentic and the most exactly correct, and thus we strive to find and identify it. Such a worldview can become an intellectual exercise losing sight of the relationship with God that was the intent of the original oral message. The primacy of relationship is identified by Jesus in his prayer in John 17:

*This is eternal life, that they may **know** you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (Jn 17:3)*

So, let's have a look at the Bible and see how it bears witness to the oral-based culture in which it was rooted.

We are told that Moses *wrote* the words of Yahweh's covenant in a documents and one assumes that he, with his royal upbringing, was highly literate. This document was given to the Levites to keep (Deut 31:9) and the only copies ostensibly made after that would, or should, have been by the kings (Deut 17:18-20). As the kings were not, on the whole, faithful to Yahweh and therefore were unlikely to have done this, the scarcity of copies led to the situation in which the only surviving copy is found by Hilkiah during Josiah's reform (2 Kgs 22:8-13). What

did Moses' written record comprise? We are never told; and, while some assume it was the whole Torah – the five books attributed to Moses – others think that it was just the book of Deuteronomy.

Most of the rest of the people of Israel never had the opportunity to read a written text of God's law. Moses *spoke* to the people, passing God's message to them orally. He also instructed the Levites that, on the occasions of festivals, they should read the law aloud to the people so that they could memorise and obey it:

*Then Moses wrote down this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. Moses commanded them: "Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission, during the festival of booths, **when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God** at the place that he will choose, **you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing**. Assemble the people – men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns – **so that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law**, and so that their children, who have not known it, **may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God**, as long as you live in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess." (Deut 31:9-13)*

The people thus had to rely on memory to remember God's law for months or even years between these events.

We see something similar happening much later in Israel's history when, in the post-exilic era, Ezra read the law aloud to the people who had gathered in the square to listen, and the Levites then interpreted it for them. This is recorded in Nehemiah 8:1-8.

Prophetic oracles were by nature oral and were given in person. They were inherently authoritative as the prophet spoke the message from God to the king and the people. The passionate words were heard and repeated, passing from mouth to mouth as people wondered at Yahweh' message.

"Nava, while the men are outside, tell me quickly - did you hear what the prophet Jeremiah said to the king today?!"

"I heard that there was a lot of shouting and the king was upset?"

“Yes, Batya. Jeremiah was calling out the behaviour of the king and the elders of our people who have been dishonouring Yahweh by neglecting temple services and abusing the poor! He was heard by many who were waiting for an audience with the king, and the word has spread. He threatens Yahweh’s judgment on us all!”

Jeremiah prophesied for approximately twenty years before God told him to write down all his oracles from that time period (Jer 36:1-4). That was version one and we know what happened to it: the king carved it up and threw it into the fire! A second version was then written and it was different to the first – it was an expanded version with additional oracles.

So which version was correct? The authority of the text was derived from the authority of the prophet who *spoke* messages from God – and the core message was the same regardless of which version of Jeremiah’s oracles was read. We can see the impact of the message on the king, even though he only heard the shorter version. It is essential to note that authority was not in the correctness of the details of the written text but in the oral message from God through his prophet.

But what about the accuracy of memory for remembering and passing on important stories, traditions, and information? We all know the power of memory when it comes to telling a child a bedtime story!

“Well, Mishael, what story would you like me to tell you tonight?”

“Mama, the one about our ancestor David and the giant Goliath!”

“Well, long ago, our people were ruled by our first king, Saul, who was rather a coward when it came to fighting for our people and defending the name of Yahweh. But a young stripling, David, strode down towards the giant, picking up 3 stones from the stream along the way....”

“No, no, mama! Not 3 stones, 5!”

“Of course, Mishael, you are quite right! Well, let’s carry on with the story....”

As we note in this example, although minor changes may be allowed, the child will immediately correct any major changes to the narrative. Such is the case in oral cultures both past and present, where the elders are responsible for accurately transmitting narratives, teachings, and traditions of their people.

In order to help the accuracy of memory, various literary tools are useful. These include: repetition, as is used in songs and poetry, including the Psalms; short pithy sayings in the form of proverbs; and narratives which set out the stories of important figures from the past, such as those of Deborah, and David. While our modern brains are untrained in the art of memorization (since we rely on the availability of written text in books or on the internet), memories trained by an oral culture can accurately recall vast amounts of knowledge. Oral storytelling involves more of the brain than just the intellect, and the body itself contributes to the narrative with gestures and movements that add to the experience. This helps both the storyteller and others to absorb and remember the story. Think of a piece of music – notations on a page are dry and uninteresting but come to life with sound. The flavour of *this* article will be different depending on whether you are watching it on video, listening to it on the podcast, or reading the paper.

Both the Greek philosophers and the Jewish rabbis placed great value on the spoken word, interacting with their students in discussion and debate. The written text was less frequently used, and when it was, it was a tool to assist oral discourse rather than being of primary importance in itself. We have all experienced how meaningful an oral teaching session, followed by interactive discussion, can be – over and above the interesting information that may be gleaned from a book.

Plato puts words into the mouth of Socrates, who never wrote anything, in his dialogue, *Phaedrus*:

Writing, is inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind. It is a thing, a manufactured product ... Secondly, Plato's Socrates urges, writing destroys memory. Those who use writing will become forgetful, relying on an external resource for what they lack in internal resources. Writing weakens the mind ... Thirdly, a written text is basically unresponsive. If you ask a person to explain his or her statement, you can get an explanation; if you ask a text, you get back nothing except the same, often stupid, words which called for your question in the first place ... Fourthly, ... Plato's Socrates also holds it against writing that the written word cannot defend itself as the natural spoken word can: real speech and thought always exist essentially in a context of give-and-take between real persons.

While some Jews, like those of Qumran and the Sadducees, valued written texts, Rabbinic Judaism shared with the Greek philosophers the belief that the oral tradition had more authority. Their traditions and teachings only became embodied in written texts like the Mishnah in approximately the 3rd century AD.

Jesus himself taught the people orally, interacting with them on a personal level. He always told stories which related meaningfully to events and circumstances of their everyday lives, engaging the imagination. He distinguished between the elite literate leaders who had access to the written texts, and the crowds who were taught by them when he asked the leaders, “*Have you not read ...?*” while asking the people, “*You have heard that it was said ...*” (e.g., Matt 12:3, 5; Matt 5:21, 27, 33). He had a level of education that allowed him to read the scroll in the synagogue (Lk 4:16-22), but he embodied the Word of God to the people authoritatively, relationally, and orally.

Most significantly, Jesus gave no instructions to his followers that his teaching be inscribed as text but they were to teach others in the same way that he had taught them. The oral testimony of the eyewitnesses was authoritative for the early church and was the basis for the written texts, as we learn from the beginning of Luke’s gospel, for example. We can therefore safely conclude that their message, whether in oral or later written form, preserved and transmitted the essence and essentials of what Jesus said and did, even though they did it in such varied texts as the four gospels.

Paul, as a Pharisee and an itinerant rabbi, well versed in the Law, would also have valued oral interaction and teaching over a written text, as that was the Pharisees’ perspective. We see the importance he placed on personally traveling to preach and teach, only sending letters to those whom he had already met face-to-face. The only exception was the letter to the Roman ecclesia, but even in this instance the letter would have been read aloud to them by Phoebe, Paul’s representative, who would have then answered any questions they had about it. Although the letters are all we now have as a record, they would have been secondary to his oral teaching.

I think that it is very important to note that the text of the scriptures used by most people in Jesus’ and Paul’s day was the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew texts. The Septuagint differs from the Hebrew texts, sometimes significantly, but neither Jesus nor Paul denigrates it. Rather, Paul quotes from it frequently, using its differences to make key theological points.

As the Church became politically recognised and established, and the generations of those who had been eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection died out, the tendency among the literate was to become constrained by textual records such that the spirit of the spoken word was subsumed by the authority of the written text.

In conclusion, I hope that I have illustrated that written text is secondary to the spoken word in the history of God's interaction with his people. Even though modern critics with a text-based perspective discount the reliability and accuracy of the formative oral tradition in which the Scriptures were born, *the spoken word was the method chosen by God, and practiced by his son Jesus*, and so it should be acceptable to us. Textual detail and precise wording serve well to transmit the truths of Scripture but the still small voice on the mountaintop offers relationship.

My plea now, therefore, is that, instead of quibbling over discrepancies in the written text, we take seriously that God's word has been *transmitted* to us in textual form but is *embodied* in an authoritative person, the Lord Jesus, who seeks a relationship with each one of us.

Some Resources

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