Creating a New “Great Divide”: The Exoticization of Ancient Culture in Some Recent Applications of Orality Studies to the Bible

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One of the main contributions of orality studies in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible studies has been to reject the thesis of the “great divide,” which posited a gulf between oral and written cultures of the ancient world. While critique of the thesis is to be welcomed, some of the criticisms have set up an artificial great divide of their own. This new divide exoticizes ancient culture by exaggerating the differences between modern and ancient cultures. I caution against this trend and show that this exoticizing of ancient culture can be seen in the perceived function of ancient and modern texts and the perceived differences between the mind-set of ancient literates and modern literates. I suggest that a balanced approach needs to take into account the complexity of both orality and literacy in reconstructing the function of scribes and their texts in ancient Israelite circles.

In recent years there has been a resurgence in orality studies as applied to the study of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.¹ This focus on oral dimensions of biblical texts has drawn on the burgeoning field of orality and literacy studies,

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¹I have called this a resurgence since a focus on the oral characteristics of biblical books is not really new at all. In the past scholars have uncovered vestiges of an oral past in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible texts. These endeavors spawned classical form-critical approaches, which focused on the (preliterary) oral dimensions of biblical texts. Form critics often began with a study of the form and then turned to look for analogies in both ancient and modern cultures (e.g., Hermann Gunkel, The Legends of Genesis [New York: Schocken, 1966; German original, 1901]). Similarly, the recent resurgence of interest in the oral dimensions of biblical texts shares similar concerns in looking for analogous cultural models to help make sense of the biblical material.
the foundations of which were laid by the seminal work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, along with the scholars of the so-called Toronto school, namely, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, and Walter J. Ong. A theory oweing to the legacy of these pioneering scholars has been that of the “great divide” that contrasts oral cultures and literate ones to the extent that a chasm between them is envisioned. That is, the orality affected only preliterary traditions and had no effect on traditions once they reached written form. This great-divide theory has triggered significant debate over the years, particularly regarding theories of the development of cultures and civilization. The writings of the Toronto school led to the dominance of this theory, even though among these pioneering scholars there was no unanimity regarding its existence or its putative “greatness.”

Some revisionist work in the area of orality and literacy has contested the great-divide theory. One area in which this has been vigorously argued is in the area of compositional styles, with many emphasizing continuity between oral and literate cultures and suggesting that oral traditions continued to exist alongside and to interact with literate traditions. Another contested claim concerns the assertion that oral and written cultures were almost universally different, implying not only cultural differences but the psychological superiority of the latter.

In this vein, some


have denigrated the great-divide theory as “primitivism” insofar as it discriminates against nonliterate by underscoring the achievements of literate cultures. Furthermore, the writings of the Toronto school have sometimes been criticized for their technological determinism, assumptions of evolutionary normativism, and the coherence of their work with ideas of Western European exceptionalism. Some proponents of the great divide can be read as suggesting that the development of writing was essential for the development of civilization and for the higher evolution of human consciousness. In order to counter this bias, some studies have underscored the achievements of nonliterate societies (e.g., the Inca civilization) in order to offset the evolutionary aspects of the theory. Most, however, have stayed away from the extremes, and many recent studies have pointed out that these implications are not inherent in the work of the Toronto school.

Within the last twenty or so years, explicitly biblical studies have also criticized the great-divide hypothesis on several fronts and have underscored the intensely oral character of the culture of ancient Israel. Such studies maintain that recognizing this pervasive orality is essential for the interpretation of the biblical text and is a corrective to the assumption that orality was relevant only to a pre-literate stage. Against the view that such a gulf separates oral and literate cultures, it has been suggested that the relation of orality and literacy be understood as a continuum of sorts, rather than a line in the sand. Along this continuum, oral and

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6 Blom, review of Orality and Literacy, 183; similarly, Finnegan, Literacy and Orality, 12–14.
9 Ibid., 7.
10 E.g., Finnegan, Literacy and Orality.
13 Niditch, Oral World, 3.
14 Ibid., 108–30. Similarly, Carr critiques the great-divide theory and places his study in a
literate cultures interacted and influenced each other on a sliding scale. That is, the influence of orality was felt even when texts were being composed, and literacy and orality existed side by side, each influencing the other.

Studies following this lead posit the influence of orality even on late Israelite literature, given the largely oral context of postexilic Israelite culture. Even when texts were being written and copied, they largely functioned orally. Texts were used as aids in oral performance, rather than as repositories of information or texts actually meant to be read. Similarly, due to these needs and priorities, scribes largely functioned as “performers” rather than copyists, and the texts they produced are best seen as scribal “performances.” Oral culture was so influential that the scribes who composed and copied biblical books, though literate, had an “oral mind-set” that would not have perceived the idea of variation and change in the same way as would a modern literate person. This putative oral mind-set may not only account for what we perceive as textual variants in the manuscript evidence for biblical books but may even explain divergences in the MT itself between, for example, Chronicles and its putative Vorlage, the Deuteronomic History.

In my judgment, this area of research has pushed Hebrew Bible scholarship in the right direction: a reassessment of the so-called great-divide thesis is warranted. Some of the assertions and conclusions offered in place of a great divide, however, also merit critical attention. In this essay, I will show not only that some of these latter claims are based on a failure to take into account the full range of relevant historical data in ancient Israel but also that some of what has been said in denigration of a great-divide thesis has in fact set up another artificial great divide of its own: between ancient and modern cultures. This new divide exoticizes ancient culture in a way that exaggerates the differences between modern and ancient cultures. This outcome is evident especially in assertions regarding the differing functions of ancient and modern texts and in the differing mind-sets of ancient literates and modern literates.

Through detailed examination of these positions and consideration of ancient historical evidence as well as modern analogues, this study will demonstrate the artificial nature of this new construction of the relationship between orality and

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literacy. I will suggest that any approach to these issues needs to take into account the complexity of both orality and literacy in reconstructing the function of scribes and their texts in ancient Israelite circles.

I. The New Great Divide: Differing Functions of Ancient and Modern Texts

Texts to Be Performed—Not Read

Several Hebrew Bible scholars who reject the great-divide theory have accentuated the differences between how texts functioned in the ancient world and how they function today. It has been suggested that, rather than function as repositories of information, ancient texts had as their main purpose to aid memorization or oral performance.\(^{17}\) In this vein, it is further asserted that, unlike modern texts, ancient texts were not designed actually to be read.\(^{18}\) This position is often defended by pointing to the material form of ancient texts, such as:

1. Scrolls were difficult to navigate, requiring unrolling and rerolling.\(^{19}\)
2. Many texts had no spaces between words (e.g., Greek uncial texts were written in all capitals with no spaces).
3. Ancient Semitic texts lacked vowel markers (with only consonants represented in the script).
4. Texts written using the Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform system required the memorization of thousands of syllabic images or forms in order to read.

These perceived limitations of the physical presentation of texts have led some to conclude that ancient readers must have already memorized these texts in order to read them.\(^{20}\) Ironically, while such studies attempt to counter anachronistic models of ancient texts and ancient reading based on our own experiences in a print culture, these perceived difficulties in reading ancient scrolls are themselves anachronistic.\(^{21}\) The fact that we moderns might have difficulty in reading these ancient scrolls does not mean that ancient users did so. To a modern reader (like myself), who is accustomed to reading a modern book, the use of a scroll would seem


\(^{18}\) E.g., Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 4, 6.

\(^{19}\) E.g., ibid., 98.

\(^{20}\) Carr writes, “The visual presentation of such texts presupposed that the reader already knew the given text and had probably memorized it to some extent” (ibid., 5). Carr allows that “some masters of the tradition could sight-read such texts,” but most could not (ibid., 4).

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 14.
awkward indeed. Even when the codex was invented, however, most people continued to prefer the scroll over the codex for quite some time.22 This point suggests that they did not find reading scrolls as difficult as we might today.23

Regarding the uncial form or scriptio continua instead of word separation, there is evidence that in Greek and Latin manuscripts this form was actually preferred by readers, who considered its format elegant.24 Furthermore, Greek uncial manuscripts did make accommodations to readers by making columns of narrow lines (ca. fifteen to twenty letters), beginning each subsequent sentence/verse in a column slightly to the left of where the first letter on the previous line began, in order to help the reader more quickly find the next unit (prose texts), or setting out poetic texts to reflect their poetic structure.25 Furthermore, ancient Aramaic and Hebrew epigraphic texts clearly use word dividers to accommodate readers (see Tel Dan Stela; Mesha Stela).26

Regarding the lack of marked vowels in ancient Semitic texts, this is clearly projecting the concerns of a modern reader of texts written in a Latin alphabet, which contains distinct letters for vowels, onto the ancient reader. In fact, Semitic languages do not share this concern. Modern Hebrew and Arabic do not print vowels despite the sophistication of modern printing, which is quite capable of doing so. This is perhaps not as much an anachronistic concern as an ethnocentric one.

Regarding the impediment of the requirements of readers to memorize thousands of syllabic images, forms, or phrases and words in order to read a text, this is, again, placing modern perceptions of this difficulty on the ancient reader. In fact, the situation is no different today, despite our texts being much more “reader friendly.” Whether we realize it or not, modern readers do exactly this. No competent reader “sounds” out words in a text but instead recognizes words and phrases automatically. This is what is known as automaticity of word recognition, without which reading any text would be tedious.27 All this is to say that the physical form of scrolls does not actually appear to demonstrate that these texts were not really meant to be read but only used by those who had already memorized them or that they only functioned to aid memorization.

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23Ibid., 330.
24Ibid., 328.
26Contra Carr, who incorrectly asserts that it is not until the Hellenistic period that we find “texts with word-separation” (Writing on the Tablet of the Heart, 4).
II. THE NEW GREAT DIVIDE: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ANCIENT AND MODERN SCRIBES

Ancient Scribes Were Performers

One of the differences between ancient and modern cultures asserted by some scholars drawing on orality studies has been that ancient scribes were not copyists but “performers” and that each textual manuscript was a scribal “performance.”

By performance scholars seem to mean something like ancient oral delivery (rather than the reading of these texts) with texts being recited from memory and presuming interaction with their audiences. Several studies on Hebrew Bible texts have been published employing so-called performance criticism and reflect the assumptions and conclusions of this line of research. Raymond F. Person has summed up the concept in this way:

The ancient Israelite scribes were literate members of a primarily oral society…. When they copied their texts, the ancient Israelite scribes did not slavishly write the texts word by word, but preserved the texts’ meaning for the ongoing life of their communities in much the same way that performers of oral epic re-present the stable, yet dynamic, tradition to their communities. In this sense, the ancient Israelite scribes were not mere copyists but were also performers.

Despite their potential for stimulating new perspectives on old questions, such assertions regarding ancient scribes as performers and texts as scribal performances lack clarity. Performance requires an audience, and it is not clear who that perceived audience is thought to be. David M. Carr seems to suggest that the...

29 Carr, Writing on the Tablet of the Heart, 292; Person, “Ancient Israelite Scribe,” 602.
audience consisted largely of other scribes: “Scribal performances of traditions would have been corrected as often from parallel performances within a network of scribal masters as from consultation of a written version of a tradition.”

This seems to posit that the reading or recitation of traditions by a scribal master would have corrected other “readings” or recitations of tradition rather than refer to a text. In other words, literate scribes would “perform” a text in such a way that other literate scribes might “correct” their performance in light of a master scribe. Susan Niditch also underscores the role of oral performance but appears to envision a wider audience than does Carr. She suggests that biblical traditions “were performed to audiences, taking basic shape in content and theme in response to the audiences who hear the performances.”

Similarly, Person appears to have in mind the broader community as audience in that he compares their role to “performers of oral epic” who “re-present the stable, yet dynamic, tradition to their communities.”

New Testament scholars have made similar claims regarding New Testament texts as “performance literature,” suggesting that in communicating Scripture, often no written text was employed (or perhaps one was present but not consulted) as the texts “were originally composed and experienced orally.”

The situation with the composition and transmission of the New Testament, however, is quite different from that concerning the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, that is, the Greek of the common people. Postexilic Hebrew Bible books (the ones in view in most of this scholarly discussion) were written in Hebrew at a time when Aramaic had virtually replaced Hebrew as the language of the common person. This may not be as problematic for the model posited by Niditch, as the texts she has in mind (“stories about the patriarchs and matriarchs; portions of the exodus story; some of the tales of the judges”) for this model are classically thought to be preexilic. Yet discussions of the oral performance of postexilic texts such as Chronicles (or Samuel–Kings in Person’s view) are more problematic. Suggestions that postexilic texts were primarily for performance does not take into account the fact that Hebrew as a living language died in this period. This loss of the Hebrew language is reflected in the book of Nehemiah, wherein the Levites and Ezra have to translate the Torah into Aramaic in order for the people to understand (Neh 8:7–8). The extent to which Hebrew was replaced by Aramaic among Jews living in

32 Carr, Writing on the Tablet of the Heart, 292.
33 Niditch, Oral World, 120 (emphasis added).
36 Niditch, Oral World, 120. Of course, not all scholars today would agree that these portions of Genesis, Exodus, and Judges were written before the exile.
37 Person views both the Deuteronomic History and Chronicles as contemporaneous, postexilic, competing histories (Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles, 1–2).
Palestine during the Persian and Hellenistic period has been debated in scholarship, but there is a general consensus that Aramaic replaced Hebrew in the Persian period (thus the need for targumim). In light of this language reality, it is difficult to envision how texts written in Standard Biblical Hebrew (or Classical Hebrew) were “performances” to the community. How, then, can the transmission or composition of Hebrew texts be explained as performance when there is no audience?

**Ancient Scribes Had an Oral Mind-Set**

Another area in which differences between ancient and modern cultures have been exaggerated is in the area of their putative mind-sets. Person has championed the view that the mind-set of ancient literate scribes would be quite different from a modern literate mind-set due to the effect of the largely oral culture of which the ancient Israelite scribe was a part. In other words, he posits something like an “illiterate scribe” who, though literate, had an oral mind-set.

In his work, Person has relied heavily on the early twentieth-century work of Lord and Parry, who, in interviews with illiterate Serbo-Croatian poets, found that a poet may consider a phrase to be a single word and that the phrase when repeated, even though it contained variation from the first phrase, was considered to be the same word. For clarity’s sake I will quote part of the interview.

Nikola: Let’s consider this: “Vino pije licki Mustajbeze” (“Mustajbeg of Lika was drinking wine”). Is this a single word?

Mujo: Yes.

N: But how? It can’t be one: “Vino pije licki Mustajbeze.”

M: In writing it can’t be one.

N: There are four words here.


39 For example, Person has asserted this first in his essay “Ancient Israelite Scribe,” which was reprinted as chapter 4 of *The Deuteronomic School: History, Social Setting, and Literature*, StBibLit 2 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 83–97. Person once again restates (and partially republished verbatim) these ideas in *Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles*, 43–51.

40 Niditch’s model of oral performance (*Oral World*, 120) also partially relies on Lord and Parry, though, contra Lord and Parry, she emphasizes the continual interplay of orality and literacy (119).
M: It can’t be one in writing. But here, let’s say we’re at my house and I pick up the *gusle* [a traditional single-stringed instrument]—“Pije vino licki Mus-tajbeze”—that’s a single word on the *gusle* for me.

N: And the second word?

M: And the second word—“Na Ribniku u pjanoj mehani” (“At Ribnik in a drinking tavern”)—there.41

From this evidence Person has underscored the importance of realizing that oral societies do not understand the lexeme *word* in the same way as do modern societies.42 In fact, to an oral mind-set “one word” can mean a phrase or larger discourse. Person writes, “In this interview, we can see a clash of cultures as the literate Yugoslav insists that [four literal words] is not one word but four, while the oral poet insists that it is only one word.”43

Person further points out that the Hebrew term דבר has a similar flexibility in its semantic range, as it can mean a word, a commandment, a happening, an affair, and so on. Thus, he cautions:

> We must keep in mind, however, that the ancient Israelite unit of meaning or “word” may not correspond to our own highly literate understanding of “word” as we struggle to understand more about the primarily oral culture in which the ancient Israelite scribes lived and worked.44

While I do not wish to dispute the flexibility of the semantic range of דבר, it must be pointed out that the same flexibility exists in the English lexeme *word*. The following examples should suffice: “he sent word he would be late”; “she kept her word”; “he is a man of his word”; “we just received word of her return”; “spread the word that she is leaving”; “word on the street is …” “put in a good word for me”; “word is that they are hiring”; “wait till I give the word”; or “I would like to have a word with you.”

Given the similar semantic flexibility in the English lemma *word* and in the Hebrew דבר, there seems to be little rationale to suggest that this flexibility is indicative of Hebrew scribes possessing an ancient oral mind-set that was more comfortable with variation and less concerned with exact detail than is the case with a literate mind-set.45

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41 Cited in Person, “Ancient Israelite Scribe,” 603; Person, Deuteronomic School, 90; Person, Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles, 48.
42 Person, Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles, 49.
43 Person, “Ancient Israelite Scribe,” 604; Person, Deuteronomic School, 90; Person, Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles, 48.
44 Person, “Ancient Israelite Scribe,” 604; Person, Deuteronomic School, 90; Person, Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles, 48.
45 While this interview with the Serbian musician/poet is interesting and suggestive to an extent, in my judgment all this interview really shows is that, in this somewhat modern interview, one musician/poet [guslar-ist] has considered a “word” to be not literally a word and that a change in a sentence really was “no change.” Furthermore, it is clear that the musician/poet says this is so
Regarding the oral mind-set of literate scribes, the same fieldwork by Parry and Lord on which Person relies actually denied the possibility of what I have called an illiterate scribe. Lord clearly concluded:

The written technique … is not compatible with the oral technique, and the two could not possibly combine, to form another, a third, a “transitional” technique. It is conceivable that a man might be an oral poet in his younger years and a written poet later in life, but it is not possible that he be both an oral and a written poet at any given time in his career. The two by their very nature are mutually exclusive.

In fact, Lord held that the advent of writing in society had an inexorably adverse effect on oral tradition. Thus, according to the Parry–Lord school, an illiterate scribe is not only an oxymoron but an impossibility.

Walter Ong has examined the effect of the onset of literacy on the oral mind-set, taking into account a broad range of fieldwork with literate and illiterate subjects. Ong shows that this fieldwork has actually underscored the differences between a completely illiterate person and someone with even slight literacy. This is evident in the differences between nonliterate and even slightly literate subjects in terms of abstract thinking, categorization, logic, defining terms, and articulating self-analysis. The fieldwork of Aleksandr Romanovich Luria, for example, found that nonliterate persons strongly resisted requests for word definitions. An illiterate peasant is asked, “Try to explain to me what a tree is,” and the response is, “Why should I? Everyone knows what a tree is; they don’t need me telling them.” Another illiterate person is asked to define a car: “Say you go to a place where there are no cars.

only when he is composing or singing—for he says “but here, [when] I pick up my [instrument] … that’s a single word on the [instrument] for me” (Person, “Ancient Israelite Scribe, 603; Person, Deuteronomic School, 90; Person, Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles, 48.) This extremely limited example and such outdated research cannot bear the weight of the argument based on it. In fact, this overreliance on Parry and Lord has been noted by Carr, who writes, “Person remains remarkably dependent on the Parry–Lord hypothesis of oral composition and ‘oral mentality,’ while much recent scholarship on the oral–written interface has moved beyond” (review of The Deuteronomic School: History, Social Setting, and Literature, by Raymond F. Person, JNES 63 [2004]: 301–3, here 303).

46 Parry, Lépithète traditionnelle; Lord, Singer of Tales.
48 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 31–73.
50 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 50–54.
51 Ibid., 52; Luria, Cognitive Development, 86.
What will you tell people [a car is]?” The response was basically, “when you get right down to it, I'd say: 'If you get in a car and go for a drive, you'll find out.’” When the slightly literate subject is asked the same question, however, he responded, “It's made in a factory. In one trip it can cover the distance it would take a horse ten days to make—it moves that fast. It uses fire and steam. We first have to set the fire going so the water gets steaming hot—the steam gives the machine its power.... I don't know whether there is water in a car, must be. But water isn't enough, it also needs fire.”

Luria also offers an example in which an illiterate peasant is given a syllogism and asked to respond. “In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zembla is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What color are the bears there?” The response: “I don't know; I've seen a black bear. I've never seen any others.... Each locality has its own animals.” When the syllogism is asked of a young farmer who was “barely literate,” however, he responded, “You say that it's cold there [in Novaya Zembla] and there's snow, so the bears there are white.” Similarly, a middle-aged, barely literate farmer responds, “To go by your words, they should all be white.” All this is to say that a move toward literacy does appear to have a significant effect on thinking and reasoning.

Ong is not alone in attributing a tremendous cognitive change in an illiterate who becomes literate. The work of anthropologist Jack Goody, who collected evidence from African tribal communities, also found a lack of logical/syllogistic reasoning among illiterate individuals. The same conclusion has been drawn by ethnographers and communication theorists. If, in fact, there is a great difference between a nonliterate and a slightly literate mind-set, caution must be taken in attributing a nonliterate mind-set to a highly literate individual such as, for example, the author(s) of Chronicles.

It is also true, however, that the ascendancy of literacy does not remove all residue of orality. In other words, the results of this fieldwork or Ong’s conclusions

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53 Luria, Cognitive Development, 87; cf. Ong, Orality and Literacy, 53.
54 Luria, Cognitive Development, 90; cf. Ong, Orality and Literacy, 53.
56 Ibid., 109. As Ong comments, in the illiterate peasant’s view, “You find what color bears are by looking at them. Who ever heard of reasoning out in practical life the color of a polar bear?” (Orality and Literacy, 52).
57 Luria, Cognitive Development, 113; cf. Ong, Orality and Literacy, 52.
58 Luria, Cognitive Development, 114.
59 As Ong puts it, “A little literacy goes a long way” (Orality and Literacy, 52).
60 Goody, Interface between the Written and the Oral, 205; cf. Goody, Power of the Written Word; Goody, Domestication of the Savage Mind.
61 Gibson, “Philosopher’s Art,” 43. For another study that has underscored the effects literacy has on nonliterate, see David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, Literacy and Orality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
should not be overstretched to support or prove the great-divide theory. Ong himself emphasized the ongoing effects of orality and talked about cultures carrying “an overwhelmingly massive oral residue,” even going so far as to state that “primary orality lingered in residue … centuries after the invention of writing and even of print.” More recent work has underscored the complexity of orality and literacy and has argued against viewing them as mutually exclusive; instead, scholars recognize them as interwoven dimensions of language.

**Oral Mind-Sets Were Not Concerned with Exact Repetition**

Given that orality has continuing residual effects on literate cultures, to what extent can we posit aspects of an oral mind-set on an ancient Israelite scribe? According to Person, scribes with an oral mind-set preserved tradition in a way that generated variety and fluidity in their texts since, as “performers,” scribes allowed variations if the “performance” required. As already noted, drawing on

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62 Some have critiqued Ong’s work and suggested that it supports the great-divide theory, e.g., Jonathan Boyarin, “Voices around the Text: The Ethnography of Reading at Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem,” in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 212–38; and, in the same volume, Daniel Boyarin, “Placing Reading: Ancient Israel and Medieval Europe,” 10–37. Many have pointed out, however, that Ong in fact did not support the great-divide theory. See, e.g., Farrell, *Walter Ong’s Contributions*, 16–26, 156–63; Tannen, “Commingling of Orality and Literacy,” 40–42. Soukup, “Orality and Literacy,” 8. As Enos observes, “So enticing are [Ong’s] insights that [they] tempt the reader to over-extend, and over-estimate, the impact of literacy. Perhaps, however, that is a fault resting with the reader rather than with [Ong]. In our eagerness to (at last) offer the scholarly world a clearly stated concept that makes speaking and writing relationships apparent, we have taken the observations of [Ong] more as definitive claims rather than cogently articulated descriptive frameworks waiting for research that will sharpen understanding further” (review of Havelock, *Muse Learns to Write*, 209–10).

63 Ong himself emphasized the ongoing effects of orality (*Orality and Literacy*, 35; cf. 36, 38, 40) and talked about cultures carrying “an overwhelmingly massive oral residue” (35) and about “early literate culture” having a “massive oral residue” (68). For example, he writes, “Early written texts, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, are often bloated with ‘amplification,’ annoyingly redundant by modern standards. Concern with *copia* remains intense in western culture so long as the culture sustains massive oral residue” (40).


65 Tannen, “Commingling of Orality and Literacy,” 42. Cf. D. L. Rubin et al., “Reading and Listening to Oral-Based Versus Literate-Based Discourse,” *Communication Education* 49 (2000): 121–33; Soukup, “Orality and Literacy,” 9. These scholars also do not read Ong as holding to a great-divide theory. In their own work, however, Tannen and Rubin have moved away from using terminology like “orality-literacy” to avoid the confusion that they might be ascribing to a great-divide theory.
fieldwork of Lord, which found that the songs of Serbian poets were never sung the same way twice, Person suggested that this comfort with variation in the repetition of tradition is one aspect of an oral mind-set that affected ancient literati such as the Chronicler.\textsuperscript{66} The fieldwork on which this argument relies, however, is insufficient to support it.

First, the presence of variation in the repeated poems of oral poets does not mean that oral poets did not strive for exact repetition. After all, Lord noted that these illiterate singers actually lived in a widely literate culture and admired literacy.\textsuperscript{67} In fact, they believed (incorrectly) “that a literate person can do even better what they do, namely, recreate a lengthy song after hearing it only once.”\textsuperscript{68}

Second, other fieldwork has shown that many nonliterate actually do strive for verbatim repetition. For example, among the nonliterate people of LoDagaa in Ghana, the “Invocation to the Bagre” was something that everyone knew, yet recordings of the invocation show that the wording varied significantly from recitation to recitation. Researchers found, however, that when they recited the invocation among them the LoDagaa would often stop and correct the researchers’ version if it failed to correspond to what the LoDagaa thought the correct version was.\textsuperscript{69} In some communities, concern with verbatim repetition actually varies with different types of oral texts. It has often been observed that longer oral narratives and stories were fairly flexible in their wording, while shorter, poetic (often ritualistic) oral texts were quite fixed. For example, Joel Sherzer found considerable flexibility in the telling of oral narratives and stories among the Kuna of Panama.\textsuperscript{70} Similarly, Donald Bahr found that, in Pima oral tradition, long narrative oral texts always included certain facts but allowed variation in their actual wording.\textsuperscript{71} Regarding shorter ritual texts, however, Sherzer found that, among the Kuna in magical chants

\textsuperscript{66} E.g., Person, “Ancient Israelite Scribe,” 606. Similarly, Carr has suggested that oral performers “do not aim for absolute verbatim accuracy” or “word-for-word … reproduction” and suggests that this characteristic may explain textual variants (which he calls “memory variants”) in various manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible (“Torah on the Heart,” 26).

\textsuperscript{67} Lord, Singer of Tales, 28.

\textsuperscript{68} Ong, Orality and Literacy, 60. As Ong notes ironically, “As literates attribute literate kinds of achievement to oral performers, so oral performers attribute oral kinds of achievement to literates” (ibid).

\textsuperscript{69} Goody, Domestication of the Savage Mind, 118–19.


\textsuperscript{71} Donald Bahr, Lloyd Paul, and Vincent Joseph, Ants and Orioles: Showing the Art of Pima Poetry (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997), 175. The Pima are North American natives who traditionally lived in Arizona along the Salt and Gila Rivers.
or oral puberty rite texts, “not the slightest linguistic variation is tolerated.”

Similarly, Gary Witherspoon has found that the Navajo strove for verbatim repetition in their prayers. It is possible that with both types of oral texts, nonliterate are concerned with fixity but that verbatim fixity is achievable only in shorter, poetic texts and not in longer, narrative stories. For example, Ruth Finnegan observed that Fijian oral historians are deeply concerned with maintaining fixed oral narratives and preserving them from change throughout the transmission process. The extent to which they are successful at verbatim repetition of long oral narratives is another issue.

On the basis of these ethnographic studies, it is clear that comfort with variation in the repetition of tradition is not indicative of an oral mind-set, as oral peoples may also strive for exact repetition. (This is not to say that verbatim repetition is actually achieved among oral peoples.) Furthermore, these studies have implications for the question of whether ancient biblical writers like the Chronicler had an oral mind-set. If nonliterate people (or those we could say had an oral mind-set) did in fact care about correct repetition—even verbatim repetition—we should be cautious in ascribing to literate scribes a mind-set that was not concerned with verbatim repetition. If nonliterate admire literates’ ability to repeat things exactly, it must be allowed that a literate scribe may have valued verbatim repetition as well. If the allowance for variation in longer oral narratives (as opposed to shorter ritual texts) was due to the difficulty of maintaining verbatim repetition in lengthy texts, a literate scribe (unlike an oral narrator), working from written traditions, could conceivably have achieved verbatim repetition. Thus, variation in written tradition is not so easily explained as being due to an oral mind-set.

III. Conclusion

I do not intend to be dismissive of orality studies but instead to offer a cautionary corrective regarding their application to biblical studies. The recent resurgence of interest in orality in biblical studies is to be welcomed. Perhaps the pendulum has swung back to concerns Gunkel brought to the fore long ago. The texts we are dealing with reflect living communities that once existed. We should not be

72 Sherzer, “Poetic Structuring,” 103; Sherzer, Verbal Art, 240 n. 1.
surprised, therefore, to see some characteristics of oral origins in the texts themselves. While the theory of a great divide between oral and literate cultures has rightly been questioned, we must be cautious not to put in its place a new great divide that exoticizes ancient cultures and exaggerates differences between ancient and modern literate cultures. In my judgment, recognizing some differences between oral and literate cultures does not make one a proponent of the great divide. As fieldwork has shown, literacy does have a powerful effect on nonliterate; therefore, caution needs to be exercised before an oral mind-set is ascribed to a literate scribe. Furthermore, once an oral tradition becomes written tradition, there is at least some difference. After all, even in antiquity the difference between oral and written was acknowledged, as seen in how Socrates (as recorded by Plato) in his dialogue with Phaedrus claimed that “written words go on telling you just the same thing forever” (Plato, Phaedr. 275e).

On the other hand, orality surely continued to affect literate cultures (and still does today). The work of Niditch has shown that oral characteristics vary with different types of biblical texts that are located at different places or stages on the orality–literacy continuum. In my judgment, her approach is by and large compatible with the present study, which has exposed extensive variation in oral literature and cautions future studies against treating orality homogeneously.76 As fieldwork has shown, there is no homogeneity in orality, and neither should we assume homogeneity in literacy.

76 As Webster notes, treating oral literature homogeneously “would be to miss the subtle ways that oral literature is circulated, replicated, and perpetuated” (“Keeping the Word,” 300).
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