

Oral Tradition and Biblical Studies

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The discussion of oral tradition in biblical studies has a rather long history, so there would be no point in trying to review everything or to examine all the material with equal thoroughness. This review, then, will attempt to cover the ground in three chronological stages. The first stage, up to the early decades of this century, will do little more than consider two remarkable scholars from the end of this period, Julius Wellhausen (d. 1914) and Hermann Gunkel (d. 1932). The next stage will note the main features of three streams of research which run alongside one another from around 1930 to about 1960. The last stage will review the last twenty-five years, and here the aim will be to cover all relevant contributions and authors. For the last two stages, the Old Testament and the New Testament will be treated separately.

The terms "Bible" and "biblical studies" are ambiguous in the sense that both may refer to overlapping entities. The Christian Bible contains the Old Testament written in Hebrew with a small amount of Aramaic and the New Testament written in Greek. The Jewish Bible is, of course, that Hebrew collection which Christians adopted as the Old Testament. In what follows, the terms "Bible" and "biblical studies" will retain some of this basic ambiguity, since both Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, and New Testament will be taken into account. Scholarship has also divided along these lines in that scholars tend to be identified as specialists in the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament on the one hand or New Testament on the other. While I would be known as a student of the Old Testament, I will venture gingerly into New Testament studies in order that biblical studies in both senses of the term may be included.

There is no single book or article on oral tradition in the

Bible which covers the whole territory and so could serve as a basic reference work. The most extensive study of oral tradition in biblical studies covers only the Hebrew Bible and was published in 1973: *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel* by Douglas A. Knight. This ample volume contains a critical history of the study of tradition in Old Testament studies. While Knight's interest is mainly in work done during this century in Germany and Scandinavia, he notes some earlier discussions.

My own article in *Semeia* (1976a) and my chapter in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (1984) attempt to cover research in Old Testament studies over the last twenty-five years. An encyclopedia article on oral tradition by Robert E. Coote in 1976 covers part of the modern period. For New Testament Studies, there is an article by Leander E. Keck, "Oral Traditional Literature and the Gospels: The Seminar" (1978). Werner Kelber's work (1979, 1983) also offers background and assessment of earlier discussions, as does the book by Güttgemanns (1979, original German 1971).

As this simple chronological scheme is followed, it will be important to keep a basic question in mind: how have biblical scholars formed their opinion about oral tradition and its significance for the Bible? As with most other ancient texts, we lack substantial information as to how it was composed and reached its present form. Little can be said directly about the role of oral tradition. Since no clear picture can be reconstructed on the basis of evidence from the Bible and its historical context, one must resort to other means. Three avenues have been followed. First of all, there is the shape of the biblical text itself and the extent to which it yields clues to modes of composition and transmission. Second, one may turn to other cultures, ancient or modern, which seem to give a clearer picture of oral tradition and use these as analogies to draw conclusions about biblical texts. Third, a general picture may be assumed or a general model may be constructed which contains what appear to be the more or less universal characteristics of an oral culture; or the picture may include the main features of both oral and literate societies placed in contrast. Such a broad schema is then used to discern the presence or absence of features related to oral and written texts.

I. Up to the time of Gunkel (d. 1932)

Douglas Knight traces discussion of oral tradition among biblical scholars back as far as the time of the Reformation (1973:39-54), although at this stage oral tradition was enmeshed in debates between Catholics and Protestants about inspiration and authority of Scripture. Because it was accepted that Moses had written the first five books of the Bible, some assumed that he must have had oral traditions concerning those things recorded in the book of Genesis which had occurred before his lifetime. While this idea persisted for some time, two figures contributed significantly to an important change. Johann Gottfried Herder assumed oral sources not only for early parts of the Old Testament (Knight 1973:57-58) but also for the Gospels, as noted by Kelber (1983:77-78) and Güttgemanns (1979:178-81). A contemporary of Herder, Johann Christoph Nachtigal (1753-1819) was, in Knight's estimation (61-63), the first to propose in detail a post-Mosaic oral tradition of historical and prophetic material with his theory that oral and written traditions emerged as literature only in the period of David.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two scholars emerged as leading figures in biblical studies, Julius Wellhausen and Hermann Gunkel, and indeed they have continued to effect a remarkable influence up to the present day. Their views on oral tradition were quite different. For Wellhausen (1844-1918), authors and documents were the critical elements in any study of composition of the Bible. Drawing on the work of many predecessors, Wellhausen fashioned the classic statement for the source analysis of the first five books of the Bible. His version of the literary analysis of the Pentateuch entails four documents: J was the Yahwist document from the ninth century B.C.E., E was the Elohist from the eighth century, D or Deuteronomy came from the seventh century, and P or the Priestly tradition from the fifth century. Wellhausen also analyzed other parts of the Hebrew Bible and produced a literary analysis of the Gospels. In his famous *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (1883), oral tradition comes up in only a few, scattered comments. These are discussed, among other things, in an article by Knight in *Semeia* (1982). Wellhausen assumed that oral tradition lay behind the documents but consisted of individual stories only loosely related to each other (296) and bound originally to localities having special features like

sacred sites or geographical oddities reflected in the stories (325). Bringing oral stories together into larger, organized structures was the work of authors producing written sources. As a historian, Wellhausen did not credit oral traditions with much reliability (326).

While Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) accepted the general framework of Wellhausen's documentary theory, he displayed a much greater interest in the role of oral tradition in shaping the material which ultimately emerged as documents. Gunkel began from a basic distinction which he made between the literature of ancient peoples and the literature of modern times (1963; reprint of 1925:1-4). While modern literature is marked by the dominant role of authors who produce *Kunstpoesie*, the literature of Israel is closer to folk literature. The notion of *Gattung*, sometimes translated in English as "form" but more recently as "genre," is a key concept in Gunkel's general approach which he referred to as *Gattungsgeschichte* but which is known in English as "form criticism." In his view, most of the basic genres of Israel's literature were formed in an oral period when each had a specific setting in the life of the people (*Sitz im Leben*). Even when writing and authors took over, ancient patterns were still employed. Using this perspective, Gunkel made important contributions to the understanding of the narrative and prophetic traditions of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the Psalms.

Gunkel does not indicate how he arrived at his approach to biblical literature or where he came by his perception of oral tradition, although he acknowledges a general debt to Herder. In a major study of Gunkel's life and work, Werner Klatt mentions a number of possible, indirect influences on Gunkel's thought (1969:104-25), such as the Grimm Brothers, but Klatt is strongly inclined to attribute the large part of Gunkel's approach to his own originality (110-12; but see the views of Warner 1979 and Kirkpatrick 1984).

The fullest discussion of oral tradition by Gunkel may be found in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis. An English translation of the introduction to the second edition has appeared under the title, *The Legends of Genesis*, although in what follows reference will be made to the third edition of 1910. A number of references can be found in this edition to the now famous article by Axel Olrik, "Epische Gesetze der Volksdichtung" (1909). However, these are clearly used to substantiate insights

Gunkel had already arrived at and stated in earlier editions of his commentary. He was a perceptive reader of the biblical text.

The style of the Genesis stories may be understood, Gunkel argues, only if it is seen that they are legends from oral tradition. As folk tradition, these stories are in some real sense the common creation of the people and thus express their spirit. The setting of these stories in the life of the people is the family. Here Gunkel offers a picture, frequently cited, which describes the family seated around a fire on a winter's evening listening with rapt attention, especially the children, to the familiar, well-loved stories about early times (xxxix). Gunkel also envisages a class of storytellers, well-versed in the traditional narratives, who travelled the country and appeared at festivals. While he agreed with Wellhausen that the basic unit in narration was the single legend, he estimated that groups of stories were already brought together into small collections at the oral stage (*Sagenkränze*). Nevertheless, the main blocks of material in Genesis (primeval history, the patriarchs, and the Joseph story) were assumed to have been the result of literary collection, at which point some artistic reformulation may have taken place.

Gunkel imagined that an oral period must have entailed substantial limitations of both an intellectual and literary nature on the part of both listeners and storytellers. For example, he believed that only short works could be produced. Hence, the axiom: the shorter the story, the older it must be. He spoke of the poverty of the ancient artistry from an oral period (xxxiv). To this he traced the repetition of expressions as well as the simplicity of the description of character and the development of action. Nevertheless, legends of Genesis were for Gunkel a mature and developed art form which appealed to him very much. Oral tradition involved both stability and change. While Gunkel spoke of a remarkable reliability in the transmission of stories, he noted that transmission was characterized by change, for oral tradition exists in the form of variants (lxv). Still, in the long term, this multiformity was also a limitation. Inability to retain its purity renders oral tradition an unsuitable vehicle for history, which can arise only in a period of writing.

To be sure, Gunkel's views are open to criticism on a number of points, and indeed apt critiques have been produced by a number of scholars, for example, Sean Warner, Alois Wolf (a Germanist), and Patricia Kirkpatrick. But, given the fact that he

was writing over eighty years ago, one is rather impressed with what he attempted to do and how far he got with it. His perception of oral tradition in the biblical texts appears to be based on a sensitive reading of the texts along with a rather general notion of oral tradition and oral culture, perhaps owing much to Herder. Having sensed distinctions in style, structure, and genre between the stories in Genesis and the literature of his own day, he sought to explain them in terms of his idea of what oral tradition must have been like. He also devoted considerable attention to the presence of folklore genres and motifs in biblical texts.

Gunkel's form-critical approach and the notion of oral tradition that went with it have had a remarkable and persistent influence in both Old and New Testament scholarship up to the present. In what follows these two fields will be treated separately. Broadly speaking, they carried on their research and discussion apart from each other, even though significant overlapping and interplay can be discerned.

II. The Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament

A. From Gunkel to the Sixties

The period from Hermann Gunkel to the early sixties can be traced by considering the work of scholars in three geographical areas: Germany, Scandinavia, and North America.

1. *Germany*. After Gunkel little was written by the German scholars who followed him and developed his approach on the subject of oral tradition. Knight (1973:84-142) provides a good survey of the contribution made to the study of tradition by scholars like Gressmann, Alt, and von Rad. Only one scholar will be mentioned by way of example.

Martin Noth (1902-1968) produced major studies of the history of tradition in the historical books and in the Pentateuch, as well as writing an important history of Israel. His broad aim in the study of tradition was stated on the first page of *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (1972, original German 1948), namely, to trace the growth of the tradition from its earliest preliterate elements to the final form we now have in the Bible. He assumed a significant role for oral tradition but made no substantial

comment on its nature. Discussion and analysis of Noth's work may be found in Knight (1973:143-71) and especially in Bernard W. Anderson's introduction to his English translation of *Pentateuchal Traditions* (Noth 1972). Noth is known particularly for his frequent use of aetiological elements to trace the origins of the oral legends he identified in the Bible. He assumed they were frequently bound to specific localities.

As with Gunkel, Noth's conclusions are derived from minute examination of the characteristics of the biblical text in conjunction with some general assumptions of what must have happened in oral tradition. He did not draw a clear line between literary and oral traditions. While he accepted J and E as written sources, he posited a common tradition behind them identified as G (*Grundlage*). It could have been oral or written and Noth did not seem to think it mattered which.

2. *Scandinavia*. Alongside developments in Germany, and to some extent in reaction to them, a debate about oral tradition arose among Scandinavian scholars and continued over two decades or more. Actually, oral tradition was only one of a number of issues under discussion. For example, one finds a particular interest in the role of the cult in Israel's religion, especially sacral kingship. Knight's *Rediscovering the Traditions of Ancient Israel* provides a very useful guide to this discussion along with a full bibliography (215-382). Since the debate on the issue of oral tradition moves back and forth among a number of scholars, it would not be helpful to try to describe the whole debate or trace the exact chronology of discussion. Thus, only a broad account of the main figures and central issues in a rough chronological order will be attempted.

Most agree that the debate began with the publication of *Studien zum Hoseabuche* by the Swedish scholar H. S. Nyberg (1935). In a few brief comments Nyberg argued the following. Tradition in the ancient Orient was mainly oral and only on rare occasions purely written. A period of oral tradition lay behind most written texts, and even after inscription the principal means of transmission continued to be oral. No support was offered for these statements beyond cursory mention of two examples: the memorization of Qur'an by Muslims and the case of a Parsee priest who knew the Yasna by heart but had trouble using a written text. Nyberg claimed to have more material which has never been published (1972:9; also Widengren 1959:205-6).

Nyberg seems to have envisaged a relatively fixed and stable transmission through memorization, even though he spoke of the possibility of changes through a *lebendige Umformung* (1935:8). In large part the traditions of Israel achieved a written form after the Babylonian Exile of the fifth century B.C.E. Nyberg also stressed the contrast between cultures which rely on memory to preserve literature orally and cultures which rely on writing. Texts from ancient times should not be read like the written literature with which we are familiar because such texts are only supports for an oral tradition which remained dominant.

Others were influenced by Nyberg's views. In a monograph on the prophetic books, *Zum Hebräischen Traditionswesen* (1938), Harris Birkeland sought to support Nyberg's proposal further by appealing to descriptions of how early Arabic poetry was transmitted. While he argued for the priority of oral tradition, he accepted an interplay between oral and written.

However, the most lively and controversial supporter of Nyberg's views was Ivan Engnell. His earliest comments appeared in *Gamla Testamentet* (1945), which has never been translated into English. In 1949 he published *The Call of Isaiah*, a volume containing a brief summary of his views in response to some of his critics. A further presentation may be found in *A Rigid Scrutiny* (1969, original Swedish 1962). For Engnell oral tradition was part of a larger approach to biblical texts, called the tradition-historical method, which rejected the theory of literary documents in the Pentateuch (Wellhausen's J, E, D, and P) as well as similar documentary analysis for other parts of the Bible.

Engnell followed Nyberg in maintaining that the Old Testament was essentially oral literature which only gained written form at a later period. Oral tradition could be reliable and resistant to corruption, although he too spoke of change in terms of a "living remodeling" (likely Nyberg's term). Analysis of texts was not a matter of sorting out documents which had been put together with scissors and paste but of attempting to determine the units and blocks joined in the process of oral transmission to make larger elements of tradition (Engnell 1969:6). Cultic texts like the Psalms may have been treated differently and written down well before the Exile, so that oral and written should not be set in absolute opposition (1949:56). As evidence for the oral composition and transmission of the biblical text, he pointed to features like the use of word association, doublets and variants, epic laws, and

various kinds of patterning in poetry and prose (1969:8).

Engnell did not in the end accept Arabic traditions as useful comparative material on the question of oral tradition. They were too far removed in time and space and existed in a context with very different religious and cultic perspectives. He stressed the special character of the traditions of Israel as sacred text.

Perhaps the best known book in the English-speaking world that summarized the position of Nyberg and Engnell is *Oral Tradition* (1954) by Eduard Nielsen. The author reviews comparative material from the ancient world for learning by heart, such as the Qur'an and the Rigveda, and adds some arguments in support of oral tradition in Mesopotamia. He also covers topics like the creators and bearers of the tradition, the interplay of oral and written, and the reduction to writing. His list of the formal characteristics of oral tradition include: monotonous style, recurring expressions, paratactic style, conformity to Olrik's laws, and emphasis on memory words and representative themes (36). Nielsen tries to show that similar conditions applied for Israel.

Other Scandinavian scholars took up a critical stance. One of these was the Norwegian, Sigmund Mowinckel, whose views were noted in his *Prophecy and Tradition* (1946) as well as in an encyclopedia article (1962). He held that both traditio-historical (Nyberg, Engnell) and literary-critical (Welihausen, Gunkel) methods are important and must be allowed to interact (1962:685). He agreed that a substantial amount of the biblical traditions must be oral. But popular traditions were not, according to Mowinckel, passed on in a fixed form. Unchangeable traditions came only with the notion of a sacred text. For him oral transmission is a living process in which the traditions constantly gained new forms and entered new combinations (27). Another critic, J. van der Ploeg, expressed his doubts about any major role for oral tradition (1947).

The most vehement critic of Nyberg and Engnell was G. Widengren. In a book on the prophets, *Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets* (1948), he questioned the analogy of early Arabic poetry, claiming that it had been written down much earlier than usually assumed. He proposed rather a scribal culture in which oral tradition was not nearly as reliable as written texts (29). In Arabic tradition he distinguished two kinds of historical literature: one which was largely oral tradition and one which had mixed oral and written from the start. There was also

a more developed historical literature in which the hand of an author could be discerned (56). On the basis of this analogy, Widengren concludes that the role of oral tradition in Israel should not be exaggerated, especially with reference to its reliability. He would only assume a long oral tradition in Israel where the literature reflects nomadic or semi-nomadic conditions (122). This might be so for Joshua and Judges but not for Samuel and Kings, which must have involved a mixture of oral and written materials. In a later article, "Oral Tradition and Written Literature among the Hebrews in the Light of Arabic Evidence, with Special Regard to Prose Narratives" (1959), Widengren reasserted his earlier position with further discussion of Arabic and other traditions. In addition he suggested a distinction between Indo-European cultures, which emphasize oral, and the Ancient Near East, which had developed written traditions (218-25).

Finally, one might note a study by Helmer Ringgren (1949). Aware of the difficulty of using analogies, he attempts a study of parallel texts (e.g., Psalms 40:14-17 and 70) in the Hebrew Bible in an effort to determine whether the small differences that exist between the texts can be traced to written or oral transmission. Since some of the differences appear to be errors in hearing, he urges that one should allow for oral as well as written transmission.

In this debate the characteristics of the biblical texts retained a central place, although Engnell read the evidence differently from Wellhausen or even Gunkel. It is significant also that the Scandinavian discussion produced attempts to find suitable analogies in other cultures, although the appeals made on both sides were usually to examples from antiquity. Beyond this, some attempt was made to distinguish appropriate analogies from those that were not.

3. *North America.* Oral tradition was also discussed on the other side of the Atlantic, although not as extensively. This was very much the work of William Foxwell Albright (1891-1971), a brilliant and inquisitive scholar whose interests ranged far and wide through many disciplines and whose influence has been quite remarkable in biblical scholarship in North America.

It is astonishing that as early as 1950, in an article on "Some Oriental Glosses on the Homeric Problem," Albright referred to Parry's view that Homeric style with its repeated language and patterns was the product of many generations of singers. Albright suggested that the Canaanite texts from Ugarit may have been the

result of a similar mode of composition in which poets employed traditional diction while remaining creative artists. On the basis of Parry's suggestion, Albright criticized Gunkel's proposal that oral poetry necessarily must have begun with very short compositions. He also surmised that even in such literate regions as Egypt, Babylonia, Iran, India, and China, composition and transmission of literary works were largely oral and frequently without use of writing.

Later comments by Albright on the subject of oral tradition take no further account of Parry or even Lord. In *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (1957), there is a brief section on the characteristics of oral tradition. Here he discerns no clear line between oral and written transmission of the sort one finds in connection with texts like the Qur'an, the Rig-veda, and the Talmud in which oral transmission exists both before and after the written text. Still, he finds prose less suited than verse for reliable oral transmission and so prefers poetry to prose as historical sources. On the grounds that prose was frequently a secondary form behind which lay a poetic version, Albright agreed with the suggestions of some preceding scholars that early Hebrew prose had a poetic background. The first chapter of his *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (1969) bears the heading "Verse and Prose in Early Israelite Tradition" and is devoted to presenting "some of the evidence for early oral transmission of historical information through archaic verse" (52). It is urged that orally transmitted poetic saga lay behind the sources of the Pentateuch (35).

Albright's comments are frequently directed toward the problem of assessing the historical reliability of biblical texts. In contrast to Wellhausen and Noth, who put little trust in the early traditions of Israel, Albright urged historians to take these early stories much more seriously as sources for historical reconstruction and to be cautious in their use of aetiology in explaining origins of narratives. While conceding that oral tradition was liable to refraction and selection through adding folkloristic elements or dramatizing for pedagogical reasons, he continues to insist on the general accuracy of oral tradition and the substantial historicity of the biblical traditions (1964:56). This appears to mean the essential outline of events (1966:11).

Former students and colleagues of Albright have also spoken of an original poetic epic. In an article on the Pentateuch in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), D. N. Freedman leans

toward the notion that G (*Grundlage*), the common source which Noth assumed lay behind the Pentateuchal sources, was “a poetic composition, orally transmitted” and had its setting in the sacred festivals of Israel (714). In a later article, he doubts the notion of an epic, however attractive, and thinks rather of several poems of considerable length (1977:17). In *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (1973), Frank M. Cross argues that the sources J and E are prose variants of a cycle in poetry from the time of the Judges. In his opinion, this cycle was “originally composed orally and was utilized in the cult of covenant-renewal festivals” (294).

Neither Albright nor his successors resorted to specific analogies from other cultures to support their conception of oral tradition, although as we shall see Cross is fully aware of the work of Lord. Nor do they present any substantial argument for the existence of a poetic epic. Albright supports his theory of the priority of verse with a study of Canaanite and early Israelite poetic style (1969:1-52).

B. From 1963 to the Present

In 1963 a new dimension was introduced into the discussion of oral tradition in Old Testament studies. Attempts were now undertaken to employ field studies describing modern oral transmission in order to define the nature of oral tradition and the characteristics of oral texts. The intention was to examine the Hebrew Bible in the light of whatever information might be gained. This strategy resulted in large part from the work done by Milman Parry and Albert Bates Lord in collecting Serbo-Croatian oral narrative. Added to this original focus was the interest their work generated in disciplines like classics as well as Old and Middle English. Texts from an oral narrative tradition of Serbo-Croatian bards, along with some commentary, became available in the first volume of *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs* (1954), edited by Albert B. Lord, and in his book *The Singer of Tales* which appeared in 1960.

In my own article, “An Approach to the Problem of Oral Tradition” (1963), I tried to describe oral tradition in broad outline by surveying the comments of a number of scholars who had observed oral tradition at first hand. The aim was to sample descriptions from as broad a range of different oral traditions as possible, involving a wide variety of literary types in poetry and prose in both long and short texts. From the limited studies

available, it was clear that alongside the fixed form of transmission assumed by many earlier biblical scholars there was also an unfixed form. In fact, this latter form appeared to be the more common variety. Transmission of traditional songs, poems, and stories was accomplished by improvisation during performance involving the use of traditional language. The work of Parry and Lord, the most detailed study of this kind of transmission, suggested that ready-made language-*formulas* and formulaic phrases as well as stock scenes and descriptions called *themes*-enabled the poets to compose rapidly in performance.

My conclusion was that one would need to hold open a number of possibilities regarding composition and transmission of Old Testament texts. Some may have been written by authors. Some might have been dictations taken from an oral performer. Complexes of relatively stable material may have been joined in oral tradition. There may have been so-called “transitional” texts composed in writing but in an oral style. Finally, one would have to allow for oral texts produced in a fixed form and passed on through memorization until written down.

In what follows the studies relating to Hebrew poetry will be examined first, then studies on prose, and finally other kinds of studies.

1. Biblical Hebrew Poetry

Also in 1963, two scholars attempted to relate the work of Parry and Lord to biblical poetry. William Whallon, not a biblical scholar, published an article with the title “Formulaic Poetry in the Old Testament.” He argued that parallelism was a prosodic requirement analogous to meter in Homer and alliteration in Anglo-Saxon. Thus, the equivalent of the formula in Hebrew poetry was the pair of synonymous words in parallel sections of the line. Numerous examples were supplied. In a later book (1969), Whallon accepted both word pairs and repeated phrases as formulaic.

In the same year, and independently, Stanley Gevirtz commented briefly on “fixed pairs” (synonymous, parallel words) in the introduction to a book on Hebrew poetry. This phenomenon had already been recognized by some biblical scholars as an important feature of Canaanite and biblical poetry, but Gevirtz made the suggestion that these fixed pairs were part of a

traditional language used by Syro-Palestinian poets in oral composition (1963:10). Having come across the writings of Parry on Homer, he proposed that Hebrew poets (unlike Greek) constructed their verse primarily with the aid of these fixed pairs rather than with formulaic phrases, although he did not exclude the presence and use of such phrases as well (12).

My dissertation on formulaic language in the biblical psalms (1963) appeared as *Oral Formulaic Language in the Biblical Psalms* in 1967. This study collected phrases, usually of a line or a half-line in length, repeated either exactly or with some modification. Recent descriptions of oral poetry from three distinct areas and traditions were used as analogies: Serbo-Croatian narrative, Toda songs from South India, and Russian narrative and ceremonial poetry. It appeared that the mode of composition and transmission was similar in each case. Stock phrases were present in all these traditions. The descriptions of Toda and Russian poetry suggested that improvised composition was used for different kinds of poetry, even for short non-narrative poems. Since the fullest and most detailed account of oral composition and transmission came from Parry and Lord, their description was relied upon extensively and their terminology was adopted in a modified form. Analyses of other ancient documents like Homer and Anglo-Saxon texts were used to amplify and illustrate the field studies.

Repeated phrases were identified as formulas and formulaic phrases on the basis of close similarity in syntactical pattern and lexical items as well as conformity to line or half-line length. Since Hebrew meter was, and remains, a much-disputed question, it was left out of consideration. One hundred and seventy-seven examples of formulas and formulaic phrases were listed. Almost half of these occurred at least three times (some more than this), the rest twice. There were fifteen examples of small blocks of lines being repeated. A small number of psalms showed a clustering of repeated phrases, but only a handful of psalms contained over forty percent of this language. While it was argued that the phrases were traditional, oral-formulaic language, it was left open as to whether or not any of the present psalms are oral compositions.

A brief reply was made to Gevirtz and Whallon. While conceding the force of their suggestions, I argued then that the presence of a body of repeated phrases similar to formulas and formulaic phrases found in other traditions suggested that the

major formula in Hebrew was related to lines and cola rather than parallelism and was thus the fixed phrase rather than fixed pair. It was proposed that, while parallelism was almost always present, there was something more basic to the structure of Hebrew poetry, perhaps meter, which had to do with building lines and cola within certain limitations (1963:119). I left open the question of precisely how fixed pairs might be related to oral composition.

In a 1970 dissertation followed by an article, "A-B Pairs and Oral Composition" (1971), Perry B. Yoder made a strong case for fixed pairs as the Hebrew formula. With no demonstrable metrical limitations, he urged, formulas and formulaic phrases would not be needed. On the other hand, fixed pairs could be explained in terms of the need to produce parallel lines. Thus, Yoder contended that parallelism and not meter was the formal requirement which had to be met by the poet (1970:102). He appealed to the examples of Ob-Ugric and Toda poetry, where paired words appear to be found. Fixed pairs are then formulas, and formulaic systems involve substitution of another word in one of the positions. In psalms where I found clustering of phrases, he finds clustering of fixed pairs (1970:205-6).

The views of Culley, Gevirtz, and Whallon are specifically criticized in another study of word pairs by William R. Watters (1976). In his view, what repeated phrases exist are not sufficient to be marks of traditional oral diction, and this goes for word pairs as well. Thus he does not relate his study of fixed pairs to oral language.

About this time an interest in oral-formulaic studies became evident among some students of Frank M. Cross at Harvard University. The first sign of this interest came through a thesis on Ugaritic poetry, which is usually taken to be very closely related to biblical poetry if not part of the same Syro-Palestinian tradition (as Gevirtz [1963] has said). Richard E. Whitaker's unpublished dissertation, "A Formulaic Analysis of Ugaritic Poetry" (1969), began with a study of epithets and how they were paired to build parallel cola. From there he studied the patterns of lines which yielded traditional features like fixed line positions for elements, conventional phrases, traditional verse patterns, and groups of cola which cluster (154). One text showed a level of eighty-two percent formulaic language. He concluded that the poetry was created in oral tradition (157).

Further comments on the oral nature of the Ugaritic poems

may be found in an article by Cross (1974). He offers a few examples where, in his view, irregularities have occurred in the process of dictation to a scribe, and in this interpretation he is relying on Lord's discussion of dictation. A number of restorations are proposed which "reconstruct the original text" (8).

Another Harvard thesis, "Evidences of Oral-Formulaic Composition in the Poetry of Job" (1975), came from William J. Urbrock. It remains unpublished, but some of his material has appeared in a paper on Job (1972) and a later article (1976). Urbrock contends that significant evidence of formulaic language in Job suggests oral antecedents. This evidence includes traditional word pairs, which are deemed the basic building blocks for composing parallel cola. Over a hundred examples of colon-length formulas and formulaic systems are proposed. In selecting formulaic phrases, Urbrock was less restrictive than I was, not demanding as great a measure of semantic identity. A particular contribution of Urbrock's study is his attempt to deal with traditional *themes* in Joban poetry. Fifteen examples of repeated groups of ideas are presented which occur more than once in Job or elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Smaller units or motifs are also identified.

Two articles by another Harvard graduate, Robert B. Coote, appeared in the same year (1976a and b) with a general assessment of the application of the oral theory of Parry and Lord to biblical studies. Limitations are noted. Features like conformity to meter, formulaic density, and thrift, which made the theory convincing for Homer and Yugoslav poetry, are lacking in Hebrew poetry. Since Hebrew meter has never been described and the length of line, while apparently subject to limitation, is rather flexible, Coote wonders why Hebrew oral poets might need stock language. In addition, formulaic density is difficult to establish in any substantial way due to the paucity of comparative material. Nor can thrift be measured. The result is that, while one can make a good case for conventional language in the Psalms and Job, it cannot be demonstrated positively that this language was functional in oral composition (1976b:56-57). It is, then, hardly possible to establish whether or not a given poem was orally composed. What studies on oral language have shown, however, is that Hebrew poetry at least derived from an oral tradition. Coote defines the formula in terms of the line or colon rather than the fixed pair, which he nevertheless accepts as a device which facilitates the

composition of parallel lines. As far as the present biblical text is concerned, he is inclined to think of oral language as traces of an oral heritage in a written tradition. The question then becomes: “how is written convention shaped by the oral tradition from which it derives its constituent elements?” (57). He relates this question to those posed by form criticism and tradition history.

Coote identifies two areas where discussion of the oral nature of biblical texts may prove helpful. First, he argues that the constraints of oral Hebrew poetry have been clarified, and that they are two: “the line is of a certain length, and its meaning is self-contained” (58), although the metrical characteristics of written poetry in the Bible are still an open question. The other area is textual criticism. Since oral tradition exists in multiforms at all levels, the notion of a single original text may have to be modified at the very least. It may be useful to consider retaining variants rather than reducing and harmonizing them (1976a:915).

Three further discussions of oral poetry may be noted. A 1978 monograph by a Scandinavian scholar, Inger Ljung, applies the results of formulaic analysis to a biblical problem. Ljung tries to test the theory that there was a specific genre known as Servant of Yahweh psalms, which were rituals or reflected rituals depicting the suffering of the sacral king in an annual festival. Using the phrases collected in my work on the Psalms, she finds no clustering of this language. On the assumption that there would be a close link between oral-formulaic language and genre, she concludes that lack of this clustering rules out a special genre of Servant of Yahweh psalms.

Yehoshua Gitay turns to the question of oral tradition and a prophetic book, Isaiah 40-45, in a 1980 article, “Deutero-Isaiah: Oral or Written?” He contends that any phenomenon which might be identified as oral style can also be found in written texts. He goes on to assert that it is not appropriate to ask about oral or written, since all early texts were produced to be heard and not read.

Finally, one should note some brief comments made on the subject of oral poetry by M. O’Connor in a massive study on Hebrew meter entitled *Hebrew Verse Structure* (1980). Since this author’s main interest lies in the problem of Hebrew meter, his comments on oral poetry are presented rather cryptically in a few paragraphs. He does not discuss any of the analyses carried out on Hebrew texts but limits himself to a few general assertions about

formulas. O'Connor accepts the notion that Canaanite poetry, which in his terminology includes Hebrew, was essentially oral (103). A principal reference in his discussion of oral poetry is the collection of articles in *Oral Literature and the Formula* (Stolz and Shannon 1976), and he shows a great deal of sympathy for the views expressed in Paul Kiparsky's essay in particular. As a result, O'Connor prefers to separate the formula from the definition of meter, feeling that meter does not create the formula (104-6). He does not believe that Parry's definition of the formula, because of its metrical component, can be made to fit Hebrew or Ugaritic, which in O'Connor's view are not metrical, although they have constraints. In his opinion fixed pairs, which he calls dyads, appear to belong to the same phenomenon as do formulas in other poetic traditions, but he does not wish to tie formulas to oral composition. For example, he suggests that Homer is orally based but does not assume that it is orally composed (106).

2. Biblical Hebrew Prose

David M. Gunn has produced four articles (1974a and b, 1976a and b) on aspects of oral prose style and biblical texts. His views are summed up conveniently in chapter three of a subsequent book, *The Story of King David* (1978). Gunn is well acquainted with the work of Parry and Lord but also with a wide range of descriptions of oral prose. In his approach to the biblical text he makes a distinction between what he calls *traditional material*, conventional for the author and his audience, and *oral traditional material*, where the mode of composition of the conventional material can be specified as oral.

Examples of traditional material given by Gunn entail some specimens of repeated patterns which he calls traditional motifs. He identifies these with labels like "the two messengers" and "the woman who brings death." Examples of a given motif share a general similarity in form and content but not in wording.

Examples of oral traditional material offered by Gunn consist of short patterns which show some close verbal correspondences along with a significant measure of dissimilarity. That is to say, they seem to reflect both fixity and fluidity (1978:49-50). These, he argues, correspond to the stock description or incident identified by students of oral tradition as *theme* or *type-scene*, and so provide evidence of some kind of a connection with oral tradition.

Since he has only a limited number of examples, Gunn is cautious about what conclusions can be drawn, but he is prepared to say that “somewhere behind the story of King David (or parts of it) lies a tradition of oral narrative composition” (59). As to how biblical texts may be related to oral tradition, Gunn holds open a range of possibilities which include: transcription of a dictation of an oral story, a text written by a literate author but in an oral style, or a text in a written style with some traces of oral style. On the basis of the relatively small amount of evidence usually available, he concedes that it would be difficult to choose among these options. What keeps the possibility of some oral influence open for Gunn is the general likelihood that the stories of Israel had their formative stage in an oral tradition.

My own monograph, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (1976), deals in part with the question of oral prose. The first chapter sought on the basis of four field studies from such different geographical areas as Africa, the Bahamas, and Europe to determine what it is possible to say about the creation and transmission of oral prose. Only some general observations could be made. It seemed evident that traditional stories were passed on in such a way that both the loyalty to tradition (stability) and the creativity of the narrator (variation) were blended. Among the traditional elements commonly used in one way or other was the stock incident or episode, similar to the theme, or at least one kind of theme, discussed by Lord. It was concluded that, while the identification of such a device provided interesting clues to the nature of orally composed texts, it did not offer a definitive test for distinguishing oral texts from written. In the second chapter of the monograph, some of the famous cases of variants in the Hebrew Bible were examined in the light of the discussion of oral prose. As I had anticipated, clear judgments were not possible on the basis of such a small number of variants. Evidence for both stability and variation was compatible with what one would expect in oral variants, but it was difficult to rule out the possibility that the same sort of thing might occur in a scribal tradition which stood somewhere between a distinct oral tradition and a fully developed literary tradition. It was urged that more needs to be known about the possibility of such a “transitional” phase.

A very different approach to the oral nature of a text is found in Heda Jason’s “The Story of David and Goliath: A Folk

Epic?” (1979). A whole range of criteria is applied to the biblical story. This analysis is based on a model developed by Jason for the study of folklore. It is organized under two main headings: narrative syntax (texture and plot) and narrative semantics (terms of content and dimensions of time and space). Jason presumes that a written text would not respond to measurement by folkloristic models. Since this one does, Jason takes the story to be “an original work of oral literature or a successful imitation” (61).

A few other studies that touch on the oral question in connection with prose texts from the Bible may be noted briefly. Alexander Rofé in his “Classification of Prophetic Stories” (1970) identifies some tales which may have had their origin in oral tradition. Because they are so short in their present form, he assumes that a skillful narrator must have condensed them drastically to produce the purest form of the written *legenda*. Using a statistical approach, R. E. Bee (1973) offers a method for distinguishing oral from written texts, although he makes no reference to any studies of oral style in ancient texts. A lengthy study of the Jacob story by Albert de Pury (1975) includes several references to the work of folklorists and students of oral literature in the discussion of the nature of the cycle (463-502). In a study comparing Ancient Near Eastern and biblical tales (1978), Dorothy Irvin identifies and gives some examples of a “traditional episode” used to build stories in oral narration, although she derives this notion from Parry’s description of epithets in oral narrative poetry. Finally, a study by Hans-Winfried Jüngling (1981) examines the role of formulas (repeated phrases) in Judges 19 as marks of oral prose. He concludes that the text was a written composition based on folk models.

A much more restricted view of oral tradition in biblical prose comes from John Van Seters and is summed up in comments found in his two books: *Abraham in Tradition and History* (1975) and *In Search of History* (1983). Van Seters is unable to accept the notion of scholars like Gunkel and Noth that there was a long period of oral tradition in which significant collection and formation of tradition took place. He is even less enthusiastic about Albright’s idea of an oral epic poem behind the prose sources. Gunn’s approach is not acceptable either, as can be seen from Van Seters’ 1976 article and Gunn’s response (1976). Like Wellhausen, Van Seters stresses authors and documents, arguing that we must

think primarily of scribal traditions in a literate society (1975: 158-59, 164). As far as he is concerned, much of the writing took place rather late in the history of Israel and was the activity of distinct authors working in a scribal tradition.

To support this contention Van Seters appeals to Herodotus as an analogy (1983). A clear parallel is proposed between Herodotus and the Deuteronomist, the presumed historian of Joshua to 2 Kings. The same would be true, he suggests, of the Yahwist (J) in the Pentateuch. Like Herodotus, such historians would have both oral and written sources at their disposal. Oral tradition is envisaged as a major source not only for material but also for genres. That is to say, the historian might well have employed imitations of oral forms to invent stories for his own purposes. A historian in “a literate society as small and closely knit as the Jerusalem religious community” (1983:48) would have the writings of previous historians available to him. Consequently, while variants may be due to oral tradition, it is more likely that they can be explained as instances of literary dependence on other texts. In his book on Abraham, Van Seters was prepared to identify a few oral sources using certain criteria which he had established. Such stories must have “a clear narrative structure, movement, and unity and have features that correspond to Olrik’s epic laws” 1975:243). Questions about the usefulness of Olrik’s laws as criteria for distinguishing oral texts from written have been raised by myself (1972:28-30) and by Kirkpatrick (1984:85-88).

A recent Oxford thesis, “Folklore Studies and the Old Testament” (1984) by Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, examines some basic issues of oral tradition raised by scholars in connection with the patriarchal traditions and then investigates the Jacob stories in the light of this discussion. While Kirkpatrick agrees that oral and written literature are different, she concludes that no sure test exists which can distinguish between oral and written in the stories of the Patriarchs. Lord’s work is discussed, but it is held (following Finnegan 1977) that repetition cannot be used to distinguish oral from written texts (83-84). Nor can appeal to the presence of originally oral genres like legend help, since potential oral contexts cannot be deduced on the basis of genre (162). It is further concluded from studies on oral history that oral tradition does not preserve accurate descriptions of events for long periods of time. The work of a number of biblical scholars like Gunkel, Noth, Engnell, and Van Seters is discussed, although the

contribution of Gunn is not. When the Jacob tradition is analyzed in the light of this discussion, Kirkpatrick argues that there is no reason to posit oral units behind it. The absence of clear evidence for oral background leads her to conclude that the original Jacob story may well have begun as a continuous written narrative sometime during the reigns of David and Solomon, with some elements being added after the fall of the Northern Kingdom (722/21 B.C.E.).

3. Other Issues

Two scholars treating oral tradition in biblical texts have emphasized an anthropological point of view. In an article (1975) and a subsequent book, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (1977), Robert R. Wilson makes a contribution to the problem of the historiographic value of biblical genealogies. Wilson is sensitive to the difficulty of applying modern studies from one discipline to ancient texts in another, and so he suggests four guidelines for biblical scholars to follow when using anthropological data (16). First, comparative material must be systematically collected by trained observers. Second, the anthropological material must be seen in its own context. Third, a wide range of societies must be considered to avoid the pitfall of atypical material. Fourth, one should concentrate on the data and seek to avoid the interpretive schema placed on the data.

On the basis of an extensive examination of the relevant anthropological literature on genealogies, Wilson establishes the formal characteristics of oral genealogies in terms of segmentation, depth, fluidity, and internal structure. He concludes that genealogies are used not so much for historical purposes but rather for domestic, politico-jural, and religious goals. Oral and written genealogies are similar, except that written ones tend to become frozen while oral ones remain open to continual change. Since biblical genealogies appear to reflect the same characteristics and functions seen in the anthropological studies, historians must use them with care (199-202).

Burke O. Long also develops an anthropological slant in two articles from the year 1976. The first article (1976b) is a survey of recent field studies, especially those available since my survey of 1963. These come largely from Africa and are mostly by anthropologists. Long stresses the social and cultural dimensions of

oral tradition and is primarily interested in the social context and the dynamics of performer-audience-occasion. Nevertheless, he does touch on some of the issues involved in applying information on oral performance to texts in the Hebrew Bible: the presence of doublets and variants as common features of oral tradition, a critique of analysis of the Ugaritic texts by Cross, and the appearance of formulas in texts (contending that their presence as such proves nothing). In his other article (1976a) Long focuses on the concept of *Sitz im Leben*, or setting in life, a basic element in Form Criticism from Gunkel onward. Long argues that information from some field studies indicates that the connection between genre and setting is not nearly so close as had been suggested by Gunkel.

Two further studies relating to prose may also be noted. An article by Everett Fox, "The Samson Cycle in an Oral Setting" (1978), attempts to deal with the oral nature of the Samson story. First, he provides an English translation which seeks to reflect this oral nature and then, pointing to various kinds of repetitions in the text, he attempts to indicate their significance for interpretation. In this he harks back to Martin Buber's notion that the bible arose from recitation. The other article by Yair Zakovitch (1981) offers a number of suggestions as to the changes both in content and form which took place when oral traditions became written text.

With regard to oral tradition and historicity, three brief studies can be mentioned. There is my own article on the subject (1972), a chapter in a book by Beat Zuber (1976:73-98), and a section of Kirkpatrick's dissertation (1983:163-90). All three studies urge varying degrees of caution about the usefulness of oral tradition for historical reconstruction.

III. The New Testament

While less has been written about oral tradition in the field of New Testament studies, the course followed has been somewhat parallel to what happened in the Old Testament field, at least up until the most recent contributions. There is no complete survey of the New Testament discussions, although an article by Leander E. Keck gives a brief review of research in the sixties and seventies (1978:106-13).

One of the leading figures in New Testament studies in the twentieth century was Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976). He had

studied with Gunkel and was a leader in the application of form criticism to the New Testament. Nevertheless, Bultmann's comments on oral tradition are limited. An analysis of his position may be found in Kelber's works (1979:8-20, and 1983:208). Broadly speaking, Bultmann assumes a mixture of oral and written in the gospels. However, in his *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1963, third German edition 1958), he makes the claim that one cannot distinguish in the end between oral and written traditions since the written material displays no specifically literary character (6). As a consequence, whether the gospels were oral or written is not an issue. Thus Bultmann speaks in general terms of tradition and even mentions some laws of tradition, which may go back to Gunkel and Olrik. He argues that the person who produced the Gospel of Mark was the first to connect existent tradition complexes into a continuous story and in this he functioned largely as a redactor.

The first major study of oral and written transmission in the New Testament period came in 1961 from a Scandinavian New Testament scholar, Birger Gerhardsson, and it owes something to the significance attached to memorization and oral tradition by Nyberg and Engnell in *Old Testament Studies*. This book, *Memory and Manuscript* (1961), sought to establish from a technical point of view how the early gospel tradition was passed on. He argues that the preservation and transmission of the gospels followed the practices employed for sacred materials in Judaism of the New Testament period, although these methods are projected back from and reconstructed on the basis of Jewish writings from later periods. His analysis is long and impressive but has received sharp critique, some of which is summarized briefly in Kelber (1983:8-14). According to Gerhardsson, Jewish transmission had two features: text and interpretation; this involves an interplay between a fixed tradition which is memorized and a more flexible commentary which is less fixed. In the last few pages of the book, Gerhardsson indicates how he would apply his proposals to the gospels. Jesus taught, he claims, using the same scheme of text and interpretation. He had his disciples memorize teachings, but he also gave interpretation in a more flexible form. Differences between the gospels can be explained by assuming different redactional procedures on the part of the evangelists who worked from a Jesus tradition which was partly memorized and partly written down (334-35).

A few years later Thorlief Boman published *Die Jesus-Überlieferung im Lichte der neueren Volkskunde* (1967). The first two chapters of this book attempt to apply the results of folklore studies to the Jesus tradition. Drawing on a small selection of folklorists from the preceding half-century or so, Boman discusses a number of issues, among them topics like the narrator, the sociological setting, and the difference between *Märchen* and *Sagen*, including their historical reliability. When he examines the Gospels on the basis of this discussion, he favors, in general agreement with Gerhardsson, a period of relatively stable oral transmission of fairly large blocks of material by a series of gifted narrators extending back to Jesus.

Four other articles touch on oral tradition in various ways. A 1961 study by C.H. Lohr showed some slight awareness of new directions initiated by Parry and Lord; these are also noted in Klemm (1972). Elements of a different strategy were proposed by Ernest L. Abel (1971) and John G. Gager (1974), who have appealed to studies on the transmission of rumor as potential sources of information about what may have happened to the traditions lying behind the Gospels.

At the beginning of the seventies a book by Erhardt Güttgemanns, *Candid Questions Concerning Gospel Form Criticism* (1979), from the second German edition, 1971), engaged form criticism in an extensive critique. At the same time, considerable space was devoted to various aspects of the question of oral tradition and New Testament studies, and this examination included the roots of form criticism in Herder and Gunkel. On the basis of a brief treatment of the work of Lord, Güttgemanns concluded that one should anticipate a sharp cleavage between oral and written tradition. Thus he calls into question the notion that there was an unbroken continuity from early traditions to final Gospel (204-11). The views of Gerhardsson and Boman are explicitly rejected.

In 1977 a colloquy on the relationships among the Gospels was held at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. The papers were edited by William O. Walker and published in the following year. One of the four seminars in the colloquy bore the title "Oral Traditional Literature and the Gospels" and featured an invited paper by Albert B. Lord with a response by Charles H. Talbert. As Leander Keck noted in his paper summing up the seminar, Lord and Talbert delineate two clear and mutually exclusive

alternatives.

In his contribution to the discussion, Lord considers two kinds of evidence. First, he examines the presence of an oral traditional mythic pattern based on the life of the hero which he calls the “life story” pattern. In the case of the gospels this covers birth, precocious childhood, investiture, death of a substitute, and death and resurrection. The way the pattern appears in each of the gospels suggests to Lord that they are independent traditions. Second, he investigates sequences of episodes and how they vary among the gospels as well as the nature of verbal correspondence. The picture of stability and flexibility which he discovers is compatible with what he would expect in oral traditional versions of the text. On the basis of such a brief study and conscious of his restricted familiarity with New Testament studies, Lord does not wish to offer firm conclusions. However, he notes four ways in which the gospels appear to show oral characteristics which would relate them very closely to oral traditional literature: (1) texts vary in such a way as to rule out copying, (2) sequences of episodes betray chiastic ordering, (3) there is a tendency toward elaboration, and (4) duplications are like oral multiforms.

In his response, Charles Talbert seeks to turn each of these points around so that it supports the notion of a literary text. Supplying examples from authors around the New Testament period, he claims that: (1) authors varied the sources they copied, (2) agreement of some episodes is so close that a literary explanation is necessary, (3) authors expanded their sources, and finally (4) authors would often draw on more than one source. Thus, while the oral traditional model might well be relevant to pre-gospel materials, it is not in his opinion appropriate for the present gospels, which do not fit the pattern of oral traditional literature and which emerged in a Mediterranean culture in which books were common for a large reading public.

Finally, there is the approach of Werner H. Kelber. An article of his on oral tradition in Mark appeared in 1979, and there was a response from T. Wheeden in the same year. This exchange was followed by Kelber’s book, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1983), which also concentrates on the Gospel of Mark but extends the discussion into the other synoptic gospels and the writings of Paul. Kelber is concerned with both the oral and the written, described broadly as the world of orality and textuality, as well as the interaction between the two (xv). He seeks thereby to broaden

the scope of biblical hermeneutics.

For Kelber oral and written are significantly distinct and there is no smooth transition from one to the other. He explains that he wants to move beyond the work of Bultmann and Gerhardsson to a reconsideration of a synoptic model along the lines of Gütgemanns using the categories proposed by scholars like Parry, Lord, Havelock, Ong, Peabody, Finnegan, and Goody. In addition, he wants to go further than “a formal analysis of speech patterns, since “literary purism” cannot “penetrate to the soul of oral life” (45). From oral forms one should learn the way in which “information is organized and conceptualization transacted” (45). In other words, while he accepts the results of particular models of oral tradition in specific cultural settings and is prepared to use them, he gives a prominent place to a more general, universal model of oral culture of the type suggested especially in the work of Havelock and Ong.

In Mark, the feature of storytelling is chosen as an appropriate element through which to study pre-Markan oral tradition. While Kelber explores things like story types, language, and the arrangement of episodes, he also introduces as tools of analysis a number of general principles for defining orality. It is assumed, for example, that an oral culture grasps life in its opposites (55), values confrontation over harmony (71), and is homeostatic and self-regulated (92). It is argued that the present Gospel could not have emerged from oral composition and so must be a literary work. Thus a tension exists in Mark between the oral and the written, orality and textuality, and this tension can be seen in the way Mark seeks to “disown the voices of his oral precursors” (104) and to transform the oral traditions into a new kind of unity (130). Kelber follows this tension in the writings of Paul and concludes as a result of his whole study that the written gospel is a counterform to oral hermeneutics (185).

IV. Final Comments

After many decades of discussion, much remains unresolved. Almost all agree that the Bible probably has oral antecedents, but there is little agreement on the extent to which oral composition and transmission have actually left their mark on the text or the degree to which one might be able to establish this lineage. The

difficulties may be summed up under the headings mentioned at the beginning: the use of the biblical text, the use of analogies, and the use of broader theories.

a. *The Biblical text.* As one might expect, most scholars have sought to base their discussions on evidence derived from the Bible. Clearly, any case must finally rest on the kind of support found in the biblical text. Unfortunately, the evidence which has been used to argue for the oral nature of the biblical text is ambiguous. This is in no small measure due to the rather limited amount of evidence produced so far, a limitation which in turn is inherent in the relatively small amount of prose and poetry in the Bible. Thus, close verbal repetition of phrases, pairs of words, or blocks of material suggestive of formulaic language do not lead to definitive conclusions.

Larger repeated patterns with little or no verbal correspondence may also be compatible with what one might expect in oral variants. Nevertheless, some of the same evidence has been used to support a notion of copying and imitation in a scribal or literary tradition. This was seen in the debates between Gunn and Van Seters for Old Testament and between Lord and Talbert for New Testament. What complicates matters further is the fact, inevitable though it may be, that evidence from the biblical text is always selected consciously or unconsciously in conjunction with some general description or theory about the nature of oral and written texts. As often happens, the more ambiguous the evidence, the more decisive the outside theory becomes.

It may well be time to review again the question of repeated language of various kinds in the light of recent discussions among students of oral literature. As far as Hebrew poetry is concerned, renewed discussion of parallelism and metrical structure has taken place over the past few years. Some issues are emerging also in the study of prose. Even if there are at the moment no substantial grounds for optimism with regard to a solution of the oral/written problem, there may be room for some clarification.

Another matter worth noting is that biblical scholars have taken up the issue of oral tradition with different interests in mind. An historical interest may be prominent. In order to reconstruct the political, social, or cultural history of the people of Ancient Israel, one must assess the nature of the sources—oral or written—and their reliability. Even a history of the literature

requires that one be able to identify early sources from later ones. On the other hand, the focus may be more on the nature of text. In this case, one would seek to discover whether different modes of composition have a decisive influence on the shape of the text and what response may be required in defining critical approaches most appropriate to its interpretation.

b. *Analogies*. Discussions of oral tradition and biblical texts have frequently made use of descriptions of oral traditions in other cultural settings as analogies. The Scandinavians were the first to exploit this method to any great extent in their appeal to other ancient cultures. Some pointed to the role of oral tradition in cultures like Mesopotamia, India, or in early Arabic literature. As analogies these cultures had the advantage of being relatively close in time and space to Ancient Israel and of bearing some social, cultural, and political similarities to that people. Still the descriptions were challenged or the evidence was interpreted differently by others, all of which variety of opinion illustrates the problem of studying oral tradition in ancient societies. These situations can be no less difficult to interpret than that of the Bible.

As far as the use of field studies is concerned, the disadvantages lie not so much in the gap in time and geography, although this is a factor to consider, but in the unlikelihood of finding societies in the modern world with social, political, and cultural features closely similar to those of the biblical period. At the same time, field studies permit descriptions of what actually happens in oral situations in a wide range of different societies and cultures. On the basis of several specific descriptions of composition and transmission, one should be able with care to develop a rough general model of what is possible and likely in oral tradition when seen as a whole.

There remains the problem of how one moves from these analogies to the biblical text. Wilson's concern about guidelines with regard to drawing on the results of descriptions of oral tradition by anthropologists, folklorists, and comparatists has some pertinence. It is necessary to seek the broadest spectrum of descriptions possible, and in so doing priority needs to be given to thorough studies by careful observers. Studies of other ancient literature like Homer or *Beowulf* are important but remain secondary to field studies in that the latter are applications of fieldwork. It is also important to take account of the different

interpretative schemata being used by investigators.

When biblical scholars have discussed oral tradition, they have almost always made reference to written tradition also. It seems difficult to avoid dealing with the one without the other. While some progress has been made toward a more accurate perception of what oral tradition is, the concepts of “scribal,” “written,” and “literate” have been left more or less vague. Perhaps it is taken for granted that we know what these terms mean, since scholars go about their business by reading and writing. To be sure, Van Seters has proposed Herodotus as a model to explain how some sections of the biblical text may have been produced. In his response to Lord, Talbert has also offered a number of analogies to show how authors used written documents. It would be very useful to pursue this whole matter further to see what can be said about scribal practice in the biblical era, a period of some several hundred years. Some Old Testament scholars (Culley, Gunn, and Coote) have alluded to the difficult concept of a “transitional” text or period which presumably involves a mixture of oral and written styles or perceptions. New Testament scholars like Güttgemanns and Kelber argue for a sharp tension between the two.

c. *Broader theories.* Oral tradition may be discussed principally in terms of the nature of texts and the value of specific analogies. Yet even in Gunkel one catches a glimpse of a broader, more general view of oral culture distinct from a literary one. Nyberg also appeared to hold a similar general distinction when he claimed that we cannot read texts produced in oral tradition as we do modern literature. Kelber quite consciously and explicitly employs features of a general model of orality and textuality, here understood in terms of different media which handle information differently, an oral medium linking mouth to ear and a written one linking eye to text (xv).

The difficulty in adopting such a broad theory as a tool for text analysis lies in assessing the validity of the rather broad and general principles laid down to define orality and textuality. Old Testament scholarship has encountered similar models in the past, developed variously in terms of pre-logical or primitive mentality, corporate personality, mythopoeic thought, as well as Hebrew mentality. These models are usually based on a sharp contrast, such as pre-logical versus logical, worked out in terms of opposites. It is somewhat disconcerting to find features used in these theories now taken up and explained in terms of orality.

On the other hand, these general models have been produced because scholars have sensed distinctions and have struggled to articulate and explain them. Such general models have been challenging in the past and continue to be suggestive. Perhaps this is their primary value. They serve as probes, in McLuhan's sense, to stimulate thought and provoke reaction which may lead to new ways of looking at problems. Kelber is certainly aware of this when he treats orality and textuality as a hermeneutical problem related to how we perceive texts. It remains to be seen how matters proceed in this area, although discussion is underway. At the 1984 annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, for example, one of the sections on the program was a consultation on "The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media."

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