Annette Weissenrieder and Robert B. Coote, eds.

The Interface of Orality and Writing: Speaking, Seeing, Writing in the Shaping of New Genres


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This book is the eleventh volume in the Biblical Performance Criticism series. The volume includes papers presented at the 2009 conference in honor of Antoinette Clark Wire at San Francisco Theological Seminary as well as other contributions on related topics. Each chapter presents a contribution to the interface between orality, writing, and visual media. The main purpose of this book is to “investigate the interface of the oral and written, across the spectrum of seeing, hearing, and writing, new concepts of media theory and mediality may emerge” (xiii).


The book focuses on the place of texts, images, and oral sources in the development of early Christian ideas (ix). It is unique in that it presents a more holistic perspective than just oral performance or written texts. Many of the chapters note that both mediums played an important role in antiquity, not the binaries of orality or writing. In light of the fact that reading in antiquity meant reading aloud, certain methodological issues arise, such as defining what constitutes a text and the relationship of a pictorial image with a text and the evocation of a speech act (xii).
Susan Niditch begins section 1 with “Hebrew Bible and Oral Literature: Misconceptions and New Directions,” which demonstrates how past understandings of Israelite literature are enhanced by interpreting the narratives through oral culture. Her effort is corrective as she demonstrates how efforts to “rebuild” a text are misguided when a variant reading of a text presents genuine differences, as in the case of Achsah in Judg 1:15. Ultimately she concludes that “the Hebrew Bible, even in written form, was meant to be heard and spoken” (17).

In “Orality and Writing in Ancient Philosophy: Their Interrelationship and the Shaping of Literary Forms,” Teun L. Tieleman demonstrates how orality was preferred within Greco-Roman philosophical schools. Ideally, the pupil or disciple was to be close to a philosopher in order to learn from his life (bios). At times writings were produced (to be heard) that recounted a philosopher’s teaching that acted as “surrogate” (35). Ultimately, however, it was preferable for a student to receive instruction directly from the philosopher in order to obtain some of his character or likeness.

Catherine Hezser’s “From Oral Conversation to Written Texts: Randomness in the Transmission of Rabbinic Traditions” provides a fascinating account of the randomness that existed in transmitting rabbinc tradition. While it is the case that rabbis wanted their instruction to be passed on to later generations, what was passed on was not necessarily identical to what the rabbi taught (50). It was accepted that there would be some elements of randomness in the transmission of the tradition; it was enough that the core thought was preserved. She also outlines the fact that reading, oral discussion, and written interpretation were all intertwined (51).

Antionnette Clark Wire argues in “Mark: News as Tradition” that the Gospel of Mark was likely news that was still in process but also tradition. She states, “News can be tradition as people pass on the story that orients them to what can yet happen because of what has just happened and what is now happening” (66). As with her other work on the composition of Mark composed in performance, she makes a strong case for the gospel being composed and recomposed by favored tellers, which was then written down (68). This process is far more likely than a single scribe sitting down and writing the gospel from several stories that were collected over a period of time.

Werner Kelber’s “The History of the Closure of Biblical Texts” provides a survey of biblical texts “from their oral and papyrological beginnings to their triumphant apotheosis in print culture” (72). Kelber provides a brief history of the text and interpretation. Of central importance is the transition from a plurality of biblical texts and interpretations in the Middle Ages (90) to the solidification of the text in print. Building on the work of Walter Ong, Kelber sees the move “the Word made print” contributed to the perception
of the Bible as a closed book (93). This development spurred on other movements such as the development of a vernacular Bible, further language and cultural demarcations, and ultimately the development of the nation-state (96).

The late James Miles Foley starts out the second section with “Plenitude and Diversity: Interactions between Orality and Writing.” Rather than focus on the binaries of orality or writing, he argues for seeking a diversity of interpretive responses and the need for multiple modes of understanding. He outlines some viable approaches to understanding oral tradition, such as performance theory, ethnopoetics, and immanent art (110–11). These approaches, when combined with the parameters of composition, performance, and reception, offer greater insight into the diverse landscapes of oral tradition.

Kristina Dronsch’s “Transmission from Scripturality to Orality: Hearing the Voice of Jesus in Mark 4:1–34” asks how the Gospel of Mark offers effective communication. She builds on Antoinette Clark Wire’s theory of effective communication, emphasizing the effective production and effective reception of the gospel. Dronsch emphasizes the effective reception, which she defines as the reading of the story. One important point she makes is that there is no indication of a split between orality and the written text in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 4, readers of the gospel are invited to give their own sound to the voice of Jesus (126). The gospel was written, according to Dronsch, to offer readers an opportunity to “breathe their spirit into it” through reading it aloud (127). She argues that the readers reanimate Jesus’s voice through their own voice. Ultimately, the relationship between the text and the readers is of fundamental importance, as the gospel is deficient without the voice of the readers (129).

One area emphasized within form criticism was the oral background to the texts. While early form critics did not fully develop this, they did provide some foundations of memory and forms. In “Memory and Form Criticism: The Typicality of Memory as a Bridge between Orality and Literality in the Early Christian Remembering Process,” Ruben Zimmerman identifies the importance of repetition and typification of memory of certain forms (130). Through repetition these forms gain collective meaning. When personal interactions occur, memories are shaped by the forms. These forms were shaped, modified, and reinforced through transmission and developed into a genre (143).

Richard Horsley’s “The Gospel of Mark in the Interface of Orality and Writing,” like Foley’s piece, provides interdisciplinary engagement. He presents the importance of interacting with sociopolitical contexts of written texts as well as scribal practice in Judea and the ancient Near East (144). Horsley’s aim is to foster a greater appreciation of the composition and oral performance of Mark within the ancient context. He also
strengthens Wire’s work on early Jewish stories by examining the stories of prophets closer to the time of Jesus (159).

In “Performance Events in Early Christianity: New Testament Writings in an Oral Context,” David Rhoads emphasizes the context of performances. He identifies elements of performance events in the early church as a basis for rethinking methods of study and interpretation of New Testament writings in original contexts (170). He outlines the key components of a performance and rightly presents the performance as the site of interpretation (179). While he admits that there is much speculation concerning early Christian performances, his analysis of the available evidence is insightful and raises many good questions for future studies.

David Trobisch begins “Performance Criticism as an Exegetical Method: A Story, Three Insights, and Two Jokes” with an anecdote about several blind men feeling and describing parts of an elephant. The story makes the point that exegetes are blind, learn through comparison, and come to a consensus through communicating with each other (195). Trobisch notes the importance of performance and form criticism as exegetical methods. When they are combined, we glean new understanding of the “situation of communication in which a text functions” (197). He notes the irony and humor in Jesus’s statement about going into one’s room to pray (Matt 6:6), as the only room in a first-century Palestinian home with a door would be a bathroom. He concludes by observing the importance of historical criticism and performance criticism as essential to each other (200–201). Performance criticism takes the character of the New Testament seriously and re-creates a situation for which the texts were designed.

Section 3, “Seeing in the Shaping of New Genres,” begins with a joint chapter by Kristina Dronsch and Annette Weissenrieder titled “A Theory of the Message for New Testament Writings or Communicating the Words of Jesus from Angelos to Euangelion.” They engage with Kelber’s media theory and argue for a change in the relative value of oral and written word (207). Kelber’s work emphasized the need for face-to-face communication (Nahkommunikation) that allows for speech to be a successful form of communication and separates orality from written texts. Dronsch and Weissenrieder point out that there are times, for example, in Mark 6:1–6, when Jesus “destroys the idea of successful face-to-face communication” (209), leading to the important point that Nahkommunikation is not inevitable. The chapter provides interesting visual references to messengers who may travel great distances to communicate a message. Although the recipients are distant from the one who originally gives the message, they are still dependent on him (221). The authors evaluate the role of the messengers in the gospels and conclude that the character of the written gospel presents the repreaesentatio soni of the absent Jesus (235). The pictures utilized in this chapter help strengthen their argument that early Christian
writing should not be seen as insufficient or an inadequate substitute for face-to-face communication (235). Rather, it is a mediator.

In “Women Prophets/Maenads Visually Represented in Two Roman Colonies: Pompeii and Corinth,” David Balch examines Roman domestic art in the colonies of Pompeii and Corinth. With respect to visual images, he argues that Bacchic amphitheatre art would have carried over to the domestic sphere of the Corinthian domus (236). Balch compares and contrasts the myths, rituals, and verbal representations of Dionysian women at Pompeii and Christian women at Corinth. The similarities between the two groups are based on the common experiences of ecstatic speech, as well as joy and comfort in their worship. While not exactly parallel, both had a ritual meal. However, the myths surrounding the meals differ considerably (258–59). The anthropologies between the two sects also differed in that slave owners may have sent their slaves to the amphitheatre to be torn apart like those who oppose Bacchus. In contrast, while alive, Paul viewed himself as already dead. Again, the visual images help support Balch’s argument and provide visual representations. Aspects of Balch’s argument can be elaborated on since Bruce Longenecker’s 2016 work on Christianity at Pompeii.

Annette Weissenrieder concludes the section with “The Didactics of Images: The Fig Tree in Mark 11:12–14 and 20–21.” After demonstrating how the different interpretations of the cursing of the fig tree fall short, specifically references to Jer 8:13ff., Weissenrieder points to numismatic evidence as a hermeneutical key for understanding the passage (261). The fig tree was a symbol found on Roman coins. With this understanding, she argues that the fig tree in Mark refers not to Jerusalem but to Rome. Within the Roman context, the fig tree in Mark 11 is a “personification of the city’s founders and refounders—Romulus, Augustus, Caligula and Nero” (281). In Mark, the Roman symbols of rulership such as the scepter and robe were given to Jesus in a form of mockery, disqualifying him as king of the Jews (281). The symbolic actions of giving the robe and scepter and the correlations between the city’s founders were known through visual images throughout Rome. Weissenrieder concludes with the important point that, when we take in visual media such as the images of the fig tree on Roman coins, we gain a better understanding of a visual image leading a speech act (282).

Annette Schellenberg starts the fourth section with “A ‘Lying Pen of the Scribes’ (Jer 8:8)? Orality and Writing in the Formation of Prophetic Books.” She questions the common interpretation of Jer 8:8 that downplays the written Torah in favor of the oral word of YHWH (285). Schellenberg notes that there is no binary contrast in Jer 8:8 between orality and written text. The differences between the two were not significant to the prophets who spoke or to their editors. What was of concern was the instruction concerning YHWH from others (308), which could be deceitful. Those prophets who prophesied and
later editors who followed them likely saw their words as the authentic words of YHWH. Whether the words were written or orally spoken, there was little concern for such a distinction among the prophets or their followers.

Roger S. Nam provides an interesting study on the commission of Levitical singers in 1 Chr 25:1–6. He demonstrates, in “Writing Songs, Singing Songs: The Oral and the Written in the Commission of the Levitical Singers (1 Chr 25:1–6),” the “interworkings of writtenness and orality” (311). Nam demonstrates that there is explicit justification for a scribal culture; however, there is also the official status of oral culture within temple worship (319). Nam concludes that the Levitical singer is an example of the complexity of orality and scribality within the Second Temple period (321).

In “‘Call on Me in the Day of Trouble’: From Oral Lament to Lament Psalms,” Andreas Schuele examines the transition lament psalms take from lament to praise. Schuele argues that the transition of lament to praise is parallel to the movement from oral to written. Schuele looks at the place in life of some laments, specifically Hannah’s lament in 1 Sam 2:1–10 and the lament of Andromache in the Iliad. Schuele concludes with the observation that the lament psalms downplay or “‘domesticate’ the protest of an (oral) lament” (334).

Pieter J. J. Botha provides a fascinating chapter on “‘Publishing’ a Gospel: Notes on Historical Constraints to Gospel Criticism,” in which he explores the settings and conditions for the production of a gospel as a material artifact. (334). He examines the manuscript culture, reading the manuscripts, citing and referencing manuscripts, note taking at lectures, and different scenarios for writing a book. One of the interesting considerations Botha presents is the cost of creating a book, which would likely require a patron. This raises some interesting questions about who may have sponsored early Christian writings.

In “The Sovereignty of the Son of Man: Reading Mark 2,” Daniel Boyarin challenges the assumption that there was no Christology prior to or contained in the Gospel of Mark. On the contrary, there was indeed Christology before Jesus and “Jesus’ person, activity, and speech represent an interpretation of Christology.” Boyarin argues that there need not be a priority of Jesus before Christ. Put differently, there had to be a Christ or Christology in order for Jesus of Nazareth to fulfill the expectations (354). Boyarin supports his argument by examining the “Son of Man” usages in Mark and argues against Geza Vermes on why the this title is not a circumlocution for “I” (355–358). Jesus’s claims of authority within Mark, especially Mark 2:23–28, parallel that of the son of man in Dan 7. This, argues Boyarin, indicates that Jesus knows that he is the son of man referred to in Dan 7:13 and what that encompasses (362).
Robert Coote's “Scripture and the Writer of Mark” discusses the irony that is found in the Gospel of Mark in light of Israel's prophetic history and his audience's understanding of the prophets. The preservation of the Gospel of Mark in writing was due to Mark's desire to preserve the irony of the story of Jesus as well as previous prophets. This irony would have been lost if it was not written down. This irony is lost in later gospels such as Matthew.

In “Mapping Written and Spoken Word in the Gospel of Mark,” Holly Hearon raises the question: “How would a written text such as the gospel of Mark been perceived, encountered, and engaged in a movement where majority of the members could not read?” (379). She argues for the Gospel of Mark as a spoken proclamation by tracing how the written and spoken words are engaged with in Mark's narrative world. Hearon takes the conversation in an interesting direction by examining the references to written words as symbols of power. When there are references to written texts such as a “bill of divorce” or a coin, they are intended as symbols of power or the action they represent (381). This emphasizes the fact that those in the narrative world of Mark are not readers. There are few references to written words, which underscores the fact that Mark was intended to be an oral proclamation. Hearon asserts that, in light of the text as proclamation, a fundamental change in methodology needs to take place (391). Exegetes and students should engage with the oral and aural aspects within the text. In light of the telling and retelling of the text, further engagement with variant readings can inform contemporary readers and hearers of the gospel of previous community concerns.

Trevor Thompson concludes the book with “Writing in Character: Claudius Lysias to Felix as a Double-Pseudepigraphon (Acts 23:26–30),” which addresses the narrative in Acts 21:27–23:25, especially Claudius Lyssias’s letter to Felix. Thompson presents Theon’s six elements of narrative. When the letter is compared to the longer record of Paul’s arrest in Acts 21:27–23:25, the letter serves as a refutation of Claudius Lyssias’s account (406). Thompson argues that this letter is a literary creation by the author. He notes that the author of Acts has considerable writing skills as well as rhetorical. The literary creation of the letter of Claudius demonstrates the ability of the author to write in character (prosopopoia).

This book is ideal for those with some background understanding of media studies and the ongoing discussion concerning orality and writing. The range of engagement from the oral/aural background of ancient Israelite culture, Greco-Roman performances and philosophical dialogue, to the writing and performance of gospels provide readers with a plethora of information. Section 3 has quality images that accompany each author’s arguments.
One unclear area was the creation of new genres. It could be argued that the development of a gospel could be seen as a new genre. However, in the chapters relating to Mark, the possibility to make this point was not always evident. Further prospects along these lines may exist in looking at the development of a novel or other ancient literary genres.

Overall, this book is a welcome contribution to the field of biblical performance criticism. It contains diverse content that spans the spectrum of media and ancient content. It also opens the door for further opportunities of research.