

Summation

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I want to preface my remarks with a word of thanks to both Paula Sanders and Werner Kelber, as well as Rice University, for hosting this conference so generously and well. I was asked by our two conveners to offer, at the end of our work these past two days, some reflections on what has transpired among us. Let me begin by noting that, for me, the key to any successful conference—and I have attended several unsuccessful conferences and a smaller number of successful ones over the past four decades with which to compare this one—is the degree of interaction and interchange, the frequency of give and take, the ease of asking and learning, and the minimum of demonstrations of cleverness or willingness to upstage or diminish the work of other scholars. By these criteria, I am happy to say that this has been an unusually fruitful and successful consultation, for it has been marked, so far as I can tell, by a genuine colloquy among a thoughtfully assembled group of scholars who have been not only willing but genuinely interested in engaging one another concerning issues to which we all have devoted time and about which we care, albeit in often very different ways and from differing perspectives. In my opinion, the give and take, even when differing positions were being presented and differing conclusions were being drawn, have been exemplary, and I want to thank all of my colleagues and our two hosts again in particular for their parts in what has proven to be a most valuable and productive interchange.

As we conclude, I would like to identify five issues in particular among those that have been in play, all of which seem to me especially worth holding up for our shared, concluding reflection. All of these are, I think, worthy also of continued or new consideration.

The first issue is the possibility that the reciprocity, interdependence, and overlap of the oral and the written is in most contexts more important than the undeniable contrast, opposition, or competition between these two modes of expression and communication. Ruth Finnegan, in her response to the first day's papers, emphasized much the same notion in her discussions of "uniformity to multiplicity" and "the elusiveness of orality." David Carr writes specifically in his paper of the "interplay of textuality, orality, and memory in the emergence of literary textuality," noting that his own work has proven to him that the "bible was formed and used in an *oral-written* context." I might note also here Talya Fishman's emphasis, like that of both Werner Kelber and Gregor Schoeler, on the changing balance of oral and written emphases on the sacred texts that she, like Kelber and Schoeler, studies, and the various motivations for these changes over time.

David Nelson's assessment that "early rabbinic textuality was comprised of both oral and literary processes" and his nuanced presentation of evidence for this go nicely with Catherine Hezser's remarks on the various complementary and sometimes overlapping roles of written and oral messages in Jewish and Christian contexts in the Roman period. Examples include Josephus' reports that express the need for personal oral confirmation to establish the reliability of a written message; the importance of the oral reading of written letters, as in the early Christian churches in the time of Paul and later apostles; the significant but differing roles of both oral preaching and written documents in the growth and consolidation of the Christian community; and the importance of both personal contact and oral communication, as well as letters, among early rabbis after the fall of the temple. Hezser also notes the ambivalence in many of these cases toward the use of written communications to supplement oral letters or face-to-face meeting. (Here I might point out the comparable elements in the phenomenon in classical Islamic religious learning of preferring to hear oral reports transmitted from the Prophet and Companions over, though not excluding, simple transmission of physical, written documents).

Holly Hearon's paper joins Catherine Hezser's in showing the strong reciprocity of the spoken and the written word and their interplay in the words of the varied writers, from the Synoptics to Paul (Hearon notes, for example, that "the interchange between written and spoken word was pervasive and exhibited itself in variety of ways" in the early Christian world). Similarly, Werner Kelber's discussion of performative-chirographic dynamics "imbedded in an oral biosphere" speaks eloquently to the same close relationship of oral and written communications in the early Christian world. Here I would note also Dick Horsley's characterization of "written texts as copies of oral instructions," and his characterization of canonical texts as both written and oral, as important support for this general phenomenon of overlap and interdependence of the written and oral.

In a similar vein, Angelica Neuwirth's stress on strong oral-written interchange and the "communication process" as the scenario for the development and codification of the Qur'ān in interchange with Jewish and Christian traditions reminds us of the close relationship between the written and the oral that persisted into later Islamic times. She does, however, rightly stress the overriding importance of the oral Qur'ān as unframed or mediated Word: "Unframed by any narrative scenario the entire Qur'ān is speech as such." Or, to put it another way, "The Qur'ān . . . should be acknowledged as a highly rhetorical, frequently meta-textual document reflecting the situation of an ongoing debate." Her paper reminds us forcefully of the precedence in the Islamic case of oral communication of the Word in what she aptly calls the "Qur'ānic theologumenon" over the codified text of the later written *mushaf*—though it is an oral Word that is also an exegetical reality.

Suzanne Stetkevych's acute remarks on the memorial culture of the medieval manuscript tradition provide yet other testimony from Islamic tradition to the oral dimensions of textual study and transmission. Finally, Priscilla Soucek's exploration of "functional and aesthetic dialogue" between oral and written versions of the Qur'ān is an especially suggestive and creative way to think about the interplay of Muslims' historical engagement with the recited, the calligraphed, and the visually embellished chirographic word of God, of which they have always seen their community as guardians or trustees for succeeding generations.

It may not make much difference in the end whether one uses oral or written terminology in speaking about sacred texts in particular, since both media were clearly in play in the Near Eastern world to which all of the aforementioned papers are addressed. My own work has stressed the oral dimensions of written texts, and, conversely, it is clear that many oral texts function demonstrably in, and are then taken from, written versions once literacy is sufficiently in place to allow for this. Consequently, oral texts can become written ones and have a powerful impact as such, just as easily as written texts can be used and received, often primarily so, through oral communication (recitation, reading, chanting, paranetic citation and allusion, and so on). We need to take these seemingly simple, even simplistic, facts more seriously, as obvious as they may seem to be, since much previous work on orality and literacy has proceeded from the firm but false assumption that the two are opposites, mutually exclusive, or in every important way tied to entirely different spheres of activity, consciousness, sophistication, or civilization.

The second issue I would point to is the importance of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic location of textual practices and uses. Ruth Finnegan again pointed to this issue when she spoke about the “multiplicity” of orality and especially the “competitions for control over ideas or texts.” Dick Horsley’s association of oral textuality with low-literacy or non-literate majorities and the association of writing with small but powerful elites of a very different level of sociopolitical power is a striking instance of this. I think that John Miles Foley’s delineation in his keynote address of “democratic” agoras present us with another instance of the socially and economically differential effects of any vehicle of communication and a very productive way of contemplating and evaluating this fact. This is most persuasive in the case of his eAgora, since the oAgora and tAgora in overlap exhibit often sharp class differences. Gregor Schoeler’s remarks on the role of the specialized Qur’ān reciters (*qurrā*) in political dimensions of writing is also relevant to this issue of where in a society we should look for contexts that encourage one kind of textuality or another, differing one. Here I would note also David Carr’s work on “long-duration literature seen in the Bible” as linked to the “education and socialization of leading elites.” He goes on to make clear that with “elites” he means not only scribal professionals, but also “priestly, governmental, high-level military, bureaucratic and other elites as part of larger-scale city-states, empires, and similar formations.”

We also need to pay attention to Priscilla Soucek’s remarks about the importance of the intervention of prestigious early Islamic leaders such as ‘Uthman or al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf in the preservation and codification of the Qur’ānic text in its written or epigraphic forms especially. Also important are her remarks about the difference that liturgical and devotional practices in the early community in creating the so-called “defective” and “complete” scripts used in the earliest Qur’ān copies that we have today. Her comments indicate vividly that different contexts of religious usage (as evidenced, for example, in the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem or the very different, huge “display” copies of the Qur’ān that have survived at least partially from the early period) also have affected the forms of textual preservation and the relationship of the text’s oral recitation to its physical, visible inscription. She makes clear that different Qur’ānic versions or inscriptions were conceived and executed variously because they were aimed at users who differed markedly in their needs, intentions, and capacities.

Especially important with regard to the social context of oral and written forms of scriptural usage are Holly Hearon’s comments on the social functions and hierarchies of speech

in early Christian contexts where power, status, and access intersected in teaching and other settings of scriptural usage (such as claiming scriptural tradition as a communal identity marker). Her closing questions about social implications, in particular of the New Testament evidence, are especially suggestive of her argument that evidence of developments in the early Christian world can be found in the oral-written tensions and contrasts. Catherine Hezser's remarks on issues of networking and social power or prestige for particular rabbis and of the political impact of letter writing in early Christianity (in the control of ideology) are very much to the point here as well.

Suzanne Stetkevych imaginatively links 'Abbasid power and the *badi'* poetry movement (as well as emphasizing the role of eloquence, or *balāgha*). She does this by identifying what she calls the "retooling" of formerly mnemonic rhetorical devices into the "linguistic correlative" devices of high caliphal panegyrics closely linked with Abbasid hegemony. And Angelika Neuwirth's argument for seeing "the Qur'ān in the phase of its emergence" as "not a pre-meditated fixed compilation, a reified literary artifact, but a still mobile text reflecting an oral theological-philosophical debate between diverse interlocutors of various late antique denominations" points us as well to the historical context of the early Islamic period for a clearer sense of the Muslim scripture's development as an organic part of the wider development of an increasingly complex religious as well as socio-political world. Her deft linking of the development of the Qur'ān to the developments in the overlapping contemporary Jewish and Christian worlds is especially suggestive for the issue of context in understanding the creation and interpretation of scriptures.

Jeff Opland's remarks, as well as those of many others around the table, have also emphasized the issue of power in the history of textual function. Why move to a canon? How to justify political control? How to bolster economic and social elites' power? Scriptures have long been linked to power, from the successful inculturation of Indo-European Vedic culture in the Subcontinent of the second millennium BCE, to the Han Chinese fixation on the "classics/scriptures" (*ching*) of authoritative ethics and worldview, to the institutionalization of Buddhist texts and norms in Buddhist kingdoms of South and Southeast Asia. One can also add many other examples, from Egypt and the Ancient Near East to colonial regimes and cultures established in South America, Africa, and India. Culturally powerful texts are not neutral matters, nor merely material objects, nor only piously recited texts.

The third thing I would point to is the recurring issue or theme of mnemonic, recitative, liturgical, or performative dimensions of the religious texts of the communities that the scholars gathered here have studied and interpreted for us. This is certainly a theme that might bear serious scrutiny and study in all historical traditions. A number of comments about this dimension of religious texts in the course of our discussions could be taken as ratification of the persuasive and important conclusion of Leipoldt and Morenz in their now classical work of 1953, *Heilige Schriften*—namely, that the universal trait of scriptural texts in the Near Eastern world, to which they addressed themselves in their study, was their liturgical use.

We know that liturgical reading, recitation, cantillation, and/or performance are crucial in virtually every religious community, not simply those in the Near East. However, we could benefit from much closer study of these active and oral functions of texts in religious communal traditions. Talya Fishman points out that the writings that the rabbis excluded from the emerging biblical canon after 70 CE, even if they were venerated by others as inspired, "were not to be

liturgically performed.” Liturgical readings were reserved for “canonical” writings, not anything else, and this was not least a distinction that served the rabbi’s efforts “to authorize and advertise the Scriptural canon as defined by the rabbis.”

David Nelson’s paper reminds us forcefully of the crucial importance in the Passover Seder of ritual recitation and oral rehearsal of the Exodus to Rabbinic biblical interpretation. He does this by examining “how oral-performative and literary dynamics enabled early Rabbinic ‘hermeneutics of the Exodus’ to produce meaning in response to Jewish theological dissonance and concern for historical continuity/discontinuity.” With regard to early Christian communities, David Rhoads says that the New Testament was “performance literature” and argues that in communicating scripture, “frequently, perhaps more often than not, no written text was present Or a manuscript was present as a symbol of authority but not consulted. Performance was the way early Christians experienced the New Testament traditions.”

Compare here also Werner Kelber’s discussion of the importance of the phenomena of memory, *aides-mémoires*, and “re-oralization of textual compositions” out of the “oral-performative tradition” when the balance of oral and written texts started shifting in the medieval world. Particularly important here is his depiction of Second-Temple biblical textuality involving “multiple scriptural versions finding their hermeneutical rationale in recitation, oral explication, and memorization,” in which context he wants us to think of “the early Jesus tradition as an insistently pluriform phenomenon” involving performative or rhetorical oral textuality as well as multiple chirographic forms, and where there likely never existed an “original” text of Jesus’ words but “a plurality of originals.”

One observation that seems to be borne out by several of the papers we have shared is that any focus on the oral dimensions of the sacred texts we study, especially in the earliest, but also in all later periods of their existence, reveals that it is difficult to reconstruct adequately the functions of those texts in actual living usage. David Rhoads reminds us, for example, how little we know of the historical “oral performance” of our texts, as important as we know oral transmission to be. Nor do we really have sufficient understanding of what memorization does to our relationship to a text (in this regard, note Catherine Hezser’s remarks on Rabbinic reliance on memory for the transmission of traditions in the first and second centuries CE). Similarly, we know little of the historical oral “performance” of our texts, as Rhoads indicates clearly. Dick Horsley’s focus on the performative aspects of Mark and Matthew give further voice to the need to work on a better understanding of the living uses and functions of sacred texts that we study. This harks back also to John Miles Foley’s attention to the “iconic” uses of written texts along with their oral uses.

And, of course, the liturgical and emblematic or symbolic treatment of the physical book, scroll, or written words of sacred texts should not be overlooked. Priscilla Soucek’s nuanced paper is a salient reminder of this fact, especially where she points us to the lavish, monumental Qur’ān copies that have survived the centuries, or to the importance of copying the scriptural word by hand as a religious act, or to the widespread and lavish use of inscriptions from scripture on buildings in the Islamic world. Certainly the work of those assembled here points to openings for work on the concomitants of orality in literate as well as nonliterate contexts—concomitants that typically determine our relation to texts in a given place/time much more than do physical texts of paper and ink.

A fourth issue arising from the papers we have heard is that of the clearly shared background of our texts. With few exceptions, we have dealt with texts and traditions broadly or narrowly derived from and characteristic of the Near Eastern world of the Mediterranean basin and adjoining territories, whether Europe or West Asia. This means that the texts, traditions, and cultures we have considered and mined for our material share in large part a common vocabulary, and even, in many ways, a common conceptual world. Thus patterns of treatment of and attitudes toward the spoken and recited word, the written word, notions of deity and revelation, attitudes toward ritual and liturgy, human inspiration and communication, and so forth, are discernible even where two of the treated cultures or religious traditions most differ. Patterns of historical tradition and interpretation are also evident, especially those involving the shared collective history of God's dealing with humankind through prophets and scriptural revelations. Even the shared Abrahamic or Flood background of prehistorical Israelite tradition and the Semitic linguistic background of the terms and ideas of most of the religious traditions considered, as well as the histories of the great empires of Babylonia, Persia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, are shared backdrops to most of the material we have considered here, something implicit or explicitly recognized in several of the papers, notably Neuwirth and Fishman.

This leads to what is a very simple, but I think important, observation: that it would be good on some future occasion to bring such a collection of scholars and scholarship on written and oral traditions together with a group of scholars of other great traditions of religion and culture and textual history (for example, the Indian, both Vedic and later Hindu; the Buddhist, both Mahayana and Theravada; the Chinese, including Confucian/classical, Taoist, and others; and so-called "little" or "nonliterate" traditions of Africa, the Pacific and Australasia, Central and North Asia, the Americas, and many other places). Ruth Finnegan's many allusions and comparisons to African examples of orality give a good idea of the richness of other traditions and contexts around the globe that would be fruitful to compare with those focused on in our conference. I am convinced that such additional contexts for considering the questions we have raised would both enrich the specific studies each of us has embarked upon and expand and likely change the questions we ask of our subjects and the answers we are comfortable giving to those questions.

Fifth, and finally, there was (in both the papers and our discussions) the recurring issue of the authority of textual books, especially of the physical form of a text as book, but also of the authority of oral transmission of religious texts in many instances. In many cases this may involve more than simply the contrast of written word with oral word. Further, authority seems not to reside exclusively in the inscribed book any more than in the memorized and orally transmitted word. We need to take note of the difficulty of recapturing just how a written text, especially a sacred one, was actually understood and dealt with in earlier ages.

A telling point on the side of the authority of chirographic texts is evident in Dick Horsley's comment that the "scriptures in Jerusalem" are as much or more a statement about authority as one about writtleness. At another point, he makes the relationship between the written scripture and authority for New Testament writers very clear:

That a prophecy or a law was "written" on a scroll, especially if it was in a revered text of great antiquity, gave it an added aura of authority, for ordinary people as much as for the

literate elite. In virtually all of the instances where the Gospel of Mark uses the formula “it is written,” it is making an appeal to authority.

Similarly, Holly Hearon’s emphasis on the “permanence” of scriptural texts is about much more than their physical form. She has a particularly interesting comment regarding the way written legal or public-record texts referred to the New Testament:

These written texts represent public records of one kind or another that define social relationships, marking out the boundaries between them. This is true whether or not those bound by the documents can read them. In this respect, the documents serve a purpose beyond the words written; like inscribed coins and edifices, they function like a seal and imbue the written word with the power and authority of the person who issues or authorizes the document.

Another example is Talya Fishman’s careful parsing of rabbinic debates about the differing ambits of authority for written scriptural texts on the one hand and rabbinic “oral matters” on the other. She offers particularly interesting commentary on the rabbis’ varied use of both written and oral textuality (and the accompanying proscriptions against improper uses of both) to reinforce authority within a learned scriptural tradition. Her further suggestion is also relevant to the issue of authority of texts: namely, her idea that perhaps the regional rivalry between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis played out in their disagreements about the uses of oral and written texts and had some roots in Muslim Abbasid-Umayyad rivalries and their religious ramifications vis-à-vis *hadith* inscription.

In his paper, Werner Kelber points several times to the importance of the (very late) codification of a written Biblical canon, but also of the (early and long-persisting) oral communication and treatment of scripture as authorities for Christian life. He emphasizes especially the often downplayed importance of oral scripture as authoritative through the European Middle Ages: “For centuries . . . the Bible was to a very large extent present in the lives of the people as an oral authority: proclaimed, homiletically interpreted, listened to, and internalized.”

Gregor Schoeler’s discussion of the redaction of the written Qur’ān against the much delayed redaction of written *Hadith* collections points to issues of the relative authority of God’s book and Muhammad’s traditions as crucial to the differential treatment with regard to use of writing for each. As crucial as the oral preservation and “performance” (recitation) of the Word of God has been for Muslims, it was also the case, at least in the early centuries of Islam, that the written Qur’ān, or *mushaf*, carried special authority as *the* Book, something with which even the words and actions of the Prophet could not be allowed to compete.

On the use of written texts to reinforce social, political, or religious authority, I would note Catherine Hezser’s emphasis on the early Christian community’s “Jerusalem center” as the prime source for “official” letters sent out to guide the “diaspora” communities and thus claim authority over their “practices and beliefs.” She notes that Paul’s letters to diasporal communities “meant that the Jerusalem center’s claim to superior authority had been broken.” The center had shifted, but the written letters (probably delivered orally to largely illiterate congregations, of course) retained authority that the oral word alone did not have.

Here I want to use the prerogative of having almost the final word to essay rather cautiously—but I hope suggestively—a notion that I have on occasion entertained working out of the Islamic context. Specifically, I wonder if the Ancient Near Eastern traditions of written laws (probably symbolized most vividly and recurrently by Hammurabi’s code) and of “books” of wisdom, destinies, works, or life do not finally have more to do with their imputed authority than they do with their physical form as inscribed texts. David Carr notes in his paper the roles of written texts as “numinous symbols of . . . ancient tradition” as well as “learning aids.” I have wondered if there is the possibility that terms like *ha sefer*, *gegraptai/hai graphai*, and *kitab* are used more with reference to the authority of the word than with reference to their written character. I might note the importance of the use of the Arabic preposition ‘*ala*, “on, over, upon,” after the verb *kataba*, “to write,” which renders often the idea not so much “to write (something) on” but rather to “prescribe (something, especially that which is written down) *for* (someone)”; namely, to put forth not so much a written word (although also that) as a written word that is *authoritative*, that “makes incumbent upon” or “obligates” someone *to do* or *to be* something in particular. In other words, scripture may be more about a text that is authoritative than about a text that is written down, even though the two often seem to belong together.

What I want to say with this short final digression is that what we may be dealing with is that writtenness in the traditions we have been studying carries some signification of authoritativeness for the text that is inscribed. “Book” does seem in most of the cases we have been dealing with to be something special, something a sacred text ought to have as at least a prominent form for its meanings. What we have also seen, however, is that “book” has been an oral and aural fact at the same time that it has been a written and inscribed fact. The authority of being written down takes nothing away from the authority of the living oral word that is inscribed in the heart/memory as well as on the page/tablet. Both aspects of authoritative, important, and/or sacred texts need to be given their due as of major importance to the use and meaning of texts historically. The papers here have borne eloquent testimony to the complexity of both orality and literacy, as well as their interplay in the textuality of the traditions we have considered.

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