

Oral Tradition in Ancient Israel

Biblical Performance Criticism Series

David Rhoads, Series Editor

The ancient societies of the Bible were overwhelmingly oral. People originally experienced the traditions now in the Bible as oral performances. Focusing on the ancient performance of biblical traditions enables us to shift academic work on the Bible from the mentality of a modern print culture to that of an oral/scribal culture. Conceived broadly, biblical performance criticism embraces many methods as means to reframe the biblical materials in the context of traditional oral cultures, construct scenarios of ancient performances, learn from contemporary performances of these materials, and reinterpret biblical writings accordingly. The result is a foundational paradigm shift that reconfigures traditional disciplines and employs fresh biblical methodologies such as theater studies, speech-act theory, and performance studies. The emerging research of many scholars in this field of study, the development of working groups in scholarly societies, and the appearance of conferences on orality and literacy make it timely to inaugurate this series. For further information on biblical performance criticism, go to www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org.

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ORAL TRADITION IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Biblical Performance Criticism 4

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Acknowledgments

This book grew out of a desire to understand the process of authorship in ancient Israel, and it was originally intended as an essay for inclusion in a *Festschrift* for my teacher, Charles Krahmalkov. It quickly became apparent that the scope of the work was far larger than would suit such a chapter. Yet it should still be noted that many of the avenues explored herein owe their rudiments to discussions in Charles' classes at Michigan over a decade ago.

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . 6 vols. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992
ABL	<i>Assyrian and Babylonian Letters</i> . 14 vols. Edited by R. F. Harper. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1892–1914
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
<i>ACh Supp.</i>	<i>L'Astrologie chaldéenne Supplément</i> . Edited by C. Virolleaud. Paris: Geuthner, 1905
<i>AcOr</i>	<i>Acta Orientalia</i>
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
Akk.	Akkadian
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
ANVAO	Avhandlingar utgitt av det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo
AnOr	Analecta orientalia
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
<i>AoF</i>	<i>Altorientalische Forschungen</i>
AOS	American Oriental Series
ArbT	Arbeiten zur Theologie
ASTI	<i>Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute</i>
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
ATR	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BEATAJ	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums

Abbreviations

BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>BiOr</i>	<i>Biblica et Orientalia</i>
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CIS	Corpus Inscriptionem Semiticarum
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by William Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2003
CTA	<i>Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques dé- couvertes à Ras Shamra-Ugarit</i> . Edited by A. Herdner. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963
CTH	<i>Catalogue des textes hittites</i> . Edited by L. Laroche. Paris, 1956; repr. 1971
DDD	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> . Edited by Karel van der Toorn et al. Leiden: Brill, 1995
EA	Tell el-Amarna Tablets
<i>ErIsr</i>	<i>Eretz-Israel</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
HR	<i>History of Religions</i>
HSCP	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JANES	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series

Abbreviations

JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KAI	<i>Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften</i> . Edited by H. Donner and W. Röllig. 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1962
KBo	<i>Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköi</i> . Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 30/36/68-70/72-. Leipzig, 1916–23; Berlin, 1954–
KTU	<i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</i>
LAS	<i>Letters from Assyrian Scholars</i> . Compiled by Simo Parpola. 2 vols. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
OtSt	Oudtestamentische Studiën
PÄ	Probleme der Ägyptologie
<i>Proof</i>	<i>Proof texts</i>
<i>RelSRev</i>	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
RHR	<i>Revue d'histoire des religions</i>
Rm	Museum signlum of the British Museum
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLABib	Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica
SBLABS	Society of Biblical Literature: Archaeology and Biblical Studies
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLStBl	Society of Biblical Literature Studies in Biblical Literature
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SEÅ	<i>Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok</i>
<i>Sem</i>	<i>Semitica</i>
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
ST	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
TAPA	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
UT	<i>Ugaritic Textbook</i> . C. H. Gordon. AnOr 38. Rome, 1965
UUÅ	Uppsala universitets Årsskrift
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Abbreviations

<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>ZÄS</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde</i>
<i>ZDPV</i>	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>
<i>ZRGG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte</i>

Introduction

A decade ago, John Van Seters wrote, “A comprehensive study on ‘literacy and orality in ancient Israel’ remains to be written.”¹ To claim that this short book fulfills that desideratum would be the height of cheek. What is entailed can better be described as a volume to replace Eduard Nielsen’s 1954 *Oral Tradition*,² a comprehensive study of “oral tradition” in the narrative books of the Old Testament. The notion of oral tradition plays an important role in nearly all areas of biblical scholarship, although all too often scholars themselves admit the tentative nature of anything they hope to say about it. We write, “It began, as far as I can determine, with oral creation.”³

Actual study of the nature of oral tradition has greatly waned in recent decades, though not entirely to be sure. Patricia Kirkpatrick, the author twenty years ago of a then-seminal study of oral tradition in the Bible,⁴ now writes, “Whereas the beginning of the twentieth century augured well for the recovery of original ancient oral composition forms preserved in the biblical text, the twenty-first century seems to have all but abandoned such quests.”⁵ To abandon such a quest simply because it is difficult or unpopular would be a shame. I will argue, not merely for the sake of novelty, that oral tradition ought not be dismissed as antiquated, outmoded, nineteenth-century, Romantic, or some other fashion-conscious, wand-waving term of rejection. This volume tries to understand the nature of oral tradition and the forms it would have taken in ancient Israel, along with brief discussion of the “remains” of oral tradition in the

1. Van Seters, Review of *Oral World and Written Word*, 437.
2. Nielsen, *Oral Tradition*.
3. Rofé, *Introduction to the Composition of the Pentateuch*, 130.
4. Kirkpatrick, *The Old Testament and Folklore Study*. As Kirkpatrick herself realizes, this study is now quite outdated and need not be refuted or reexamined now.
5. Kirkpatrick, “The Jacob-Esau Narratives,” 1.

Introduction

narrative books of the Hebrew Bible. But to be clear, in spite of the exploration of such “remnants,” this study is not a quest of markers in texts that might indicate some relationship to oral composition.

The first chapter briefly surveys the history of the study of oral tradition in ancient Israel. It then presents the Oral Formulaic school of thought on oral tradition, associated with the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. It also explains the related theories on orality of Walter Ong and Jack Goody. Finally, the chapter illustrates the extent to which this theory has been adapted in biblical studies, noting the indebtedness to Oral Formulaicism in Old Testament research. Chapter 2 explains what has happened to Oral Formulaicism in the past decades, how the theory has been seriously undercut and bypassed. The particular areas of challenge to Parry-Lord and to the theories of Good and Ong will be discussed. In particular, the chapter presents areas of the world—especially the ancient Near East—where orality and literacy co-existed. Chapter 3 presents three specific cases of oral/written interaction that provide the best ethnographic analogies for ancient Israel. Homer, Icelandic sagas, and Arabic epic poetry will be shown to be of key interest. Insights from their study suggest a model of transmission in oral-written societies valid for ancient Israel.⁶ Chapter 4 draws on the insights of pre-Formulaic Scandinavian traditions historians and on the most recent studies of Israelite literacy. Drawing on current archaeology, the extent of literacy in ancient Israel and the nature of early Israelite literature are discussed in dialogue with William Schniedewind, Susan Niditch, and John Van Seters. The conclusion of this chapter is that Israel was “always oral” and “always literate.”

Chapter 5 forays into reconstructing what ancient Israelite oral literature would have been. Its focus is on the reconstruction of the oral literature of preexilic Israel, not on the Hebrew Bible. The chapter demonstrates the validity of using ethnographic analogies of Icelandic and Arabic poetry, rather than working back from written biblical texts to oral precursors. Chapter 6 considers various criteria for identifying orally derived material in the narrative books of the Old Testament. Drawing on the previous chapters, these criteria tentatively mark several passages from the biblical text as possible oral derivations. Using ethnographic data and ancient Near Eastern examples, the chapter also proposes per-

6. The term “oral-written” is David Carr’s (Carr, “Torah on the Heart,” 19).

Introduction

formance settings for both this material and the hypothetical material of chapter 5.

An epilogue treats the contentious topic of historicity and whether orally derived texts are somehow more historically reliable than other texts in the Bible. A conclusion brings together the main ideas of this monograph.

1

Oral Formulaicism in Old Testament Study

Oral Tradition in the Hebrew Bible

For over a century, since Hermann Gunkel first suggested that behind the written Pentateuchal sources of Julius Wellhausen and the Documentary Hypothesis lay oral traditions, biblical scholars have spoken of oral tradition. From 1910, Gunkel had become acquainted with Wilhelm Wundt's "Folk Psychology."¹ Wundt maintained that the movement of human societies follows historical stages, and the description of these stages was very similar to the forms and complexity of language and its development.² Gunkel adopted this thesis, and from it concluded that oral folklore was at the origin of Israel's sagas.³ From this point on, the form-critical and traditions-history methods operated under the presumption that the written literature was dependent on oral tradition.⁴ Form critics and traditions historians detected oral "substrata" by various means beneath many parts of the Old Testament. The history of this movement was thoroughly reviewed by Douglas Knight decades ago.⁵ Biblical scholars, like many other historians, "given the slightest hint of orality, however distant and unfounded, will allow their Romantic presuppositions (and ultimately their positivism!) of an elemental orality to hold forth: in the beginning there was the Oral."⁶

1. Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie*

2. Wundt, *Logik der Geisteswissenschaften*, 225–26.

3. Mitchell, "War, Folklore, and the Mystery of a Disappearing Book," 116.

4. Knierim, "Old Testament Form Criticism," 457.

5. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*.

6. Zumthor, *Oral Poetry*, 44.