

NEW TESTAMENT ORAL TRADITION:  
PROBLEMS IN THE TRANSCRIPTION

CHAPTER 3 OF THE BOOK

*THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS:  
WHY THEY WROTE HOW THEY WROTE*

BY

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*Had the **Iliad** been written, it would have been sung much less.* Jean Jacques Rousseau

*Of course the very best writing is an attempt to convey in printed words some of those overtones which are sounded by the voice and emanated from the physical personality.*  
Alfred North Whitehead

## INTRODUCTION

According to one on-line British Dictionary, transcription is “a representation in writing of the actual pronunciation of a speechsound, word, or piece of continuous text using a symbol or set of symbols specially designated as standing for corresponding phonetic values”<sup>1</sup> For the NT writer, transcription was the process of recording the Christological/theological events of their time to papyrus or vellum. The effort here is to help the reader to understand that from the spoken word to papyrus/vellum was not dictation or a simple copy process but rather a very arduous procedure that was subject to practices of oral expression and limited by the orthography of the target or writing language. Writers were not simply copying but they were re-interpreting oral traditions for the purpose of making a literary recording.

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary.com.” transcription,” *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/transcription> (accessed: December 25, 2015).

## A REVISION OF UNDERSTANDING

In recent years certain basic differences have been discovered between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing) and in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing. Many of the features that we have taken for granted in thought and expression in literature, philosophy, science, religion, and even in oral discourse among literates, are not directly native to human existence as such but have come into because of the resources which the technology of writing makes available to human consciousness. We have had to revise our understanding of human identity.<sup>2</sup>

The comments of Whitehead and Brett are particularly instructive and clear in regard to the implications of this:

Our current understanding of scripture rests in significant degree upon the more general notion in contemporary Western culture of what constitutes a book of any kind, secular or religious. In our minds, a book is written or printed document of reasonable length to which the basic access is through an individual's private, silent reading and study. For most if not all of us, the fixed, visible page of print is the fundamental medium of both information and demonstration or proof... If anything is truly important, we have to get it in writing", be it an idea, a report, a directive, or an agreement. We want tangible evidence of "documentation"; we need things of importance "signed and sealed". To a degree unknown in any other culture of history, knowledge for us is "book learning"<sup>3</sup>; and no orally communicated word carries the kind of legal, scholarly, or administrative authority for us that a written or printed document does. Ours is not only a literate, but a book and print culture – what Northrop Frye has called a post-literate culture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 1.

<sup>3</sup> G.S. Brett, *Psychology Ancient and Modern* (London: Longmans, 1928), 36-37, as cited in Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, "Of Written and Spoken Words," *Beyond The Written Word*, ed. William A. Graham (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.

In his own mind, Edward Sapir establishes the order of importance when he affirms that Language is primarily a set of phonetic (sound) symbols for the expression of communicable thought and feeling and then he goes on to say that the actual history of man and a wealth of anthropological knowledge indicate with overwhelming certainty that phonetic language takes precedence over all kinds of communicative symbolism, such as writing, all of which are, by comparison, either substitutive or excessively supplementary.<sup>5</sup>

David Black connects this thesis to the language of the Gospels as he expounds that most of our schooling, with its necessary attention to books and writing, makes it difficult for us to recognize the primacy of speech. Moreover, since the written representation of language is all that we can deal with in the case of the Gospels, it is easy to overlook the basic phenomenon of speech. But even if you have never heard a word of spoken Greek, you can recognize that the language of the New Testament is essentially “recorded speech.” It differs from the artificial literary Greek of such contemporary first-century authors as Diodorus, Strabo, Plutarch, and Philo. So by regarding language primarily as sound we can learn to appreciate the fact that the language of the Gospels was the common speech of everyday life.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1949), 7.

<sup>6</sup> David Alan Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1995), 14.

## THE ORALITY OF LANGUAGE

Historically, oral tradition has preceded written language. In his comparative study of orality and literacy, *Literature and Letters*, Octavio Paz admits that no text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation from the nonverbal world.<sup>7</sup> Siertsema asserts that, “Indeed language can be expressed in other substances than sound. But all possible substances of expression besides sound are only secondary and only try to represent in a more or less successful way spoken language.”<sup>8</sup> William Stokoe checks this but also incorporates sign language so as not to eliminate the minority deaf in his statement that, “It hardly needs repeating that the great majority of mankind have language as primary semiotic system, or that language uses as its basic symbols sounds produced by the same physiological mechanism possessed by many other creatures ... those born deaf or deafened in infancy, may have as primary semiotic system a language which uses as its prime symbols visible actions of the same kind used by many other creatures for signaling and used by the majority of mankind as supplementary or subsidiary semiotic devices.”<sup>9</sup>

Some very useful statistics that undergird the orality of language are provided by Munro Edmonson who notes that “Language is so overwhelmingly oral that of all the many thousands of languages – possibly tens of thousands spoken in the course of human history only around 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced literature, and most have never been written at all. Of the three thousand languages spoken that exist today only

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<sup>7</sup> Octavio Paz, “Literature and Letters,” trans. Irene del Corral, *Theories of Translation*, ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 154.

<sup>8</sup> B. Siertsema, *A Study of Glossematics: Critical Survey of its Fundamental Concepts* (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer Netherlands, 1955), 11.

<sup>9</sup> William Stokoe Jr, *Semiotics and Human Sign Language* (Berlin, Germany: Mouton De Gruyter, 1972), 17.

some 78 have a literature.”<sup>10</sup> There is yet no way to calculate how many languages have disappeared or been transmuted into other languages before writing came along. Even now hundreds of languages in active use are never written at all: no one has worked out an effective way to write them. The basic orality of language is permanent says Ong.<sup>11</sup>

Downes explains that, at first, the founders of the great traditions transmitted their innovations orally. The singular term "founder" should be used advisedly, since founders and their followers and opponents are embedded together in social contexts. A movement where thoughts disseminate to cultural levels cannot be the result of the activities of just one person. The gospels show 'Jesus the Jew' in historically typical situations, using various registers, engaging in religious debate. Initial teaching is oral and face-to-face; direct spoken ostensive-inferential communication one to one and one to many. This initial dissemination spreads through ever wider communication networks, ultimately gaining institutional expression.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Munro Edmonson, *Lore: An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature* (NY, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 323, 332.

<sup>11</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> William Downes "A Cognitive Theory of Religion" in *Language and Religion: A Journey into the Human Mind* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 118.



## WRITING AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Ong points out that, a deeper understanding of pristine or primary orality enables us to understand better the new world of writing, what it truly is, and what functionally literate human beings really are: beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural powers but out of these powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing. Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness<sup>13</sup>.

Ong continues to say that:

[Books] relay an utterance from a source, the one who really said or wrote the book. The author might be challenged if only he or she could be reached, but the author cannot be reached... There is no way directly to refute a text. After absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same thing as before. This is one reason why “the book says” is popularly tantamount to “it is true”. It is also one reason why books have been burnt. A text stating what the whole world knows is false will state falsehood forever, so long as the text exists.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

## NARRATIVE AND ORAL CULTURES

The shift from oral to literate culture meant that there was also a shift in how events were recorded. In strictly oral cultures there were no records of anything except what was transmitted orally. Information underwent incremental shifts with each verbal exchange and as time went by only the core of the story remained the same. The only way to preserve stories was by constantly repeating them in poem or song so that they would be rhythmically riveted in memory.

The problem of transcription from mouth to page has been overlooked by many. Writing down orally transmitted accounts was far from photography or scanning. Using the alphabet of a language that was perhaps not the writer's mother tongue was a mental wrestling match for the NT writers. The outcome was at times tinted with the writers' worldview - thoughts, biases, and culture.

One of the problems of an oral culture, is that no-one knows for sure who originated the saying unless the name was a part of the discourse. The result is that originators did not get credit for the original piece. Another unfortunate result of the process of oral transmission is that the account would have changed in places and blended with other stories so that the author's intention could have been taken out of context.

According to Ong, familiarity with literate culture blitzes our comprehension of oral culture. The transcription of the New Testament utterances from oral tradition to written texts involved reflection and contemplation by the writer that was constrained by his language and worldview.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 1-3.

The shift from orality to literacy registers in many genres of verbal art – lyric, narrative, descriptive discourse, oratory, drama and others. The genre most studied is narrative. Narrative is paramount among all verbal art forms because of the way it underlines so many other art forms, often even the most abstract. Human knowledge comes out of time. Behind proverbs and aphorisms and philosophical speculation and religious ritual lies the memory of human experience strung out in time and subject to narrative treatment. Knowledge and discourse come out of human experience and the elemental way to process human experience verbally is to give an account of it more or less as it really comes into being and exists, embedded in the flow of time. Developing a story line is a way of dealing with this flow.<sup>16</sup>

In some ways narrative is more widely functional in primary oral cultures because knowledge cannot be managed in elaborate, more or less scientifically abstract categories. Oral cultures cannot generate such categories, and so they use stories of human action to store, organize, and communicate substantial narratives or series of narratives, such as the Hebrew chronicles in the OT during the early iron age, the narratives of the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles in the NT during the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., and the Ananci (spider) stories of African heritage in the Caribbean culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>17</sup>

Narrative is particularly important in primary oral cultures because it can bond a great deal of lore in relatively substantial lengthy forms that are reasonably durable – which in oral forms means forms subject to repetition. Maxims, riddles, proverbs, and the like are of course also durable but they are usually brief. In writing or print culture, the text physically bonds whatever it contains and makes it possible to retrieve any kind of organization of thought as a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

<sup>17</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 137; see also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 20-21

whole. In primary oral cultures, where there is no text, the narrative serves to bond thought more massively and permanently than other genres.<sup>18</sup>

Robert Alter expands this thought paradigm very comprehensively:

The religious vision of the Bible is given depth and subtlety precisely by being conveyed through the most sophisticated resources of prose fiction. The characters are not simple eponymic counters in an etiological tale but are individual characters surrounded by multiple ironies, artfully etched in their imperfections as well as in their strengths. The subtly indicated achievements of fictional characterization suggest the endlessly complicated ramifications and contradictions of a principle of divine election intervening in the accepted orders of society and nature. The Biblical tale through the most rigorous economy of means, leads us again and again to ponder complexities of motive and ambiguities of character because these are essential aspects of its vision of man, created by God, enjoying or suffering all the consequences of human freedom. Almost the whole range of biblical narrative, however, embodies the basic perception that man must live before God, in the transforming medium of time, incessantly and perplexingly in relation with others; and a literary perspective on the operations of narrative may help us more than any other to see how this perception was translated into stories that have had such a powerful, enduring hold on the imagination.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the patriarchal narratives of the OT that are based on national traditions, the NT gospel and other narratives broke away from Jewish mode of thought and challenged its hierarchy with unprecedented revelation. On the other hand, according to Herbert Schneidau, they harmonize with the OT in that they reflect a steady movement away from the motives and habits of the world of legend and myth.<sup>20</sup>

Talmon emphasizes this drift in movement stating that:

The ancient Hebrew writers purposefully nurtured and developed prose narration to take the place of the epic genre which by its content was intimately bound up with the world of paganism, and appears to have had a special standing in the polytheistic cults. The recitation of the epics was tantamount to an enactment of cosmic events in the manner of sympathetic magic. In the process of total rejection of the polytheistic religions, and their

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<sup>18</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 138.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (BasicBooks a div. of HarperCollins Publishers, 1981), 22.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent* (Baton Rouge, L.A: 1977), 215.

ritual expressions in the cult, epic songs and also epic genre were purged from the repertoire of the Hebrew authors.<sup>21</sup>

Because it is a literature that breaks away from the old cosmic hierarchies, the Bible switches from a reliance on metaphor to a dependence on metonymy.<sup>22</sup> Jakobson and Halle elaborate that metaphor is drawing a similarity between two things while metonymy is drawing contiguity between two things.<sup>23</sup> In the study of the unconscious they have been called condensation and displacement.<sup>24</sup>

In the second of three epistles attributed to Peter, the writer condenses the personage and work of Christ into a potent metaphor in a "literary" way. Thus in 1 Peter 2:7 "the *stone* which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner." The "stone" represents multiple concepts and facets of Jesus Christ. The concept of metaphor (condensation) establishes greater meaning in the text within the context of the entire chapter as he refers to "the stone" or "stones" repeatedly. In this way, the difficulty of transferring meaning from thought and oral expression through transcription to written format was approached by the writers.

However, it is the metonymy or displacement of "the rock" that really establishes the identity of Christ within salvation history. Referring to Israel of the late Bronze Age, the writer of 1 Cor 10:4 wrote: "And did all (Israel) drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ." Here the writer contiguously connects OT with NT, firmly instilling by displacement that the "Rock" was Christ. This

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<sup>21</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation – Principles and Problems," *Göttingen Congress Volume* (Leiden, 1978), 354.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 26

<sup>23</sup> Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Two Aspects of Language and the Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances in Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague and Paris, Mouton: 1956).

<sup>24</sup> Russell Grigg, Lacan, *Language, and Philosophy*, 151-152, 160.

displacement has its abstract chiefly in the song of Moses (Deut 32); it is written in Deut 32:18 that: “Of the Rock *that* begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee.”

## SUMMARY

One cannot visit the world of the New Testament writer without the understanding that their culture was more oral than literate. This means that the process of transcription required extraordinary effort biased by the writers' worldview and the language of transcription. Even with this understanding, the reader's immersion in a literate world blocks the comprehension of oral culture. This fact obfuscates much of the writers' methodology to the reader but must be understood in investigating why they wrote how they wrote.