

## **Oral Tradition and Biblical Scholarship**

**Susan Niditch**

Interest in oral tradition and the border where oral meets written has been an integral part of modern biblical scholarship. The very foundation of “form-criticism” as practiced by Hermann Gunkel and more recently Claus Westermann involves the search for traditional oral forms as they may have been performed and received in actual life settings. Close work with the recurring patterns of biblical language and content has been influenced moreover by the studies of Albert Lord and Milman Parry, so that a number of analyses have explored the possibility that pieces of biblical literature are rooted in oral performance (Robert Culley, David Gunn). In recent years, the shift in orality studies, reflected in the work of John Miles Foley and the many articles that have appeared in *Oral Tradition*, has affected the way in which biblical scholars approach the topic of orality in ancient Israel. No longer are many scholars convinced that they can uncover original oral Ur-forms, nor that the most seemingly oral-traditional or formulaic pieces are earliest in date. I have argued that Israelite literature includes many oral “registers” reflecting various tastes, functions, and milieus. The most formulaic may be the latest in date, for an ongoing oral tradition of some kind is a constant in every culture. Similarly, scholars are increasingly sophisticated about the nature of “oral” and “written” and about the meaning and nature of literacy in traditional or ancient cultures.

Within a “great divide” conceptual framework, Biblical studies tended to suggest that early, simple oral works gave way to sophisticated written works produced by a literate elite. Scholars are now beginning to see that orality and literacy exist on a continuum and that there is an interplay between the two modalities, a feedback loop of sorts. More is to be learned about Israelite culture and the preserved corpus of ancient literature in the Bible by attention to this interplay, to the variety of oral traditional forms present, and to the way in which the written works of scripture are heavily informed by the assumptions of an essentially oral culture in style, content, and meaning.

Concern with oral tradition has great significance for the way we go about our studies as biblicists. My current work on a new commentary and translation of Judges is illustrative. First, in the very work of translation one tries to make choices that respect the aural qualities of the text, to convey as best one can word-play or re-use of a root. One draws attention to recurring formulaic patterns in language and content within notes, thereby allowing the modern reader to experience some of what Foley calls the “metonymic” or traditionally referential qualities of literature, and to the special economic way that meaning and message are produced in this literature.

Finally, attention to oral traditional considerations leads me away from “constructing” a text from the many manuscript versions available. I was taught as a graduate student to choose the shortest reading, the best reading, the implicitly “original” reading that has been corrupted. Attention to oral traditional considerations leads one instead to respect textual variation as evidence of the way in which qualities of the oral continue in written traditions. Various communities heard the text differently and indeed some like the Qumran community preserved written variants, longer and shorter, right within the same library.

*Amherst College*

### References

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