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Oral Hermeneutics?

Charles Madinger

Since the era of the Enlightenment, teachers of the Word have regarded the science of systematically consistent rules for interpretation as an art used skillfully (Ramm, 1999, p. 1). Even Ram's title reveals bias and should have been more precisely titled "The *Western* Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A *Universal* Textbook." The term "hermeneutics" is a transliteration of a Western (Greek) term and concept regarding interpretation, built on Greek logic, rhetoric, and epistemology. The Bible typically uses it to provide meaning (interpretation) to dreams and visions, as seen with Joseph and Daniel. Pauline methods for interpreting languages were also employed by his physician protégé, Dr. Luke, along with his encouragement to the believers in Corinth regarding prophecy.

The current issue of the *Orality Talks Journal* addresses the need for a more timeless approach to the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the textual representation of the eternal God communicating his mind and heart (2 Cor. 2:10-14) through all five senses. That cannot be fully captured in text alone. He chose to reveal it using all five of our senses that reflect his very image. The Living Word of God is a person. The Word of God is personal. The living Word of God is meant to reveal his transforming insights and truths.

This issue also calls for "holistic hermeneutics." The grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture (hermeneutic), in one sense, was nothing new to Protestant reformers. It seeps out of the Bible songs, histories, letters, and prophecies. However, it is only one approach. Holistic hermeneutics (An ORI digibook in progress that includes multiple approaches to understanding the Scriptures, from "the-Bible-itself," Talmudic, allegorical, and mystical to more modern approaches that include emotive, moral, and psychological approaches.) considers much more than the history and grammar of the text. The Dominant Minority of Christendom superimposes a worldview and ways of coming to truth (epistemologies) that may even inhibit the Spirit of God from accomplishing his purposes of revealing the mind of the Father to cultures, contexts, and individuals. The contribution of Josh Frost unlocks many doors that were either not considered in the past, irrelevant, or bordering on heretical. "How can we begin to interpret the psalms of David without feeling his angst or elation?" An emotive hermeneutic is essential for understanding the resurrection morning scene at the tomb and the events that followed.

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A R T I C L E S

Rethinking the Old Wineskins of "Academic" for the New Wine of Oral and Oral–Preference Learners

Larry W. Caldwell

Abstract: For too long, the West has dominated theological education worldwide. This reality is primarily due to the West's past centuries of colonization of the non-Western world, which has ramifications for theological education even today. In light of this continuing Western theological dominance, it is critical that the "old wineskins" of the Western academy and what it considers to be "academic" be rethought today, especially in light of the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners. This article explores such necessary rethinking in four parts. First, examining the West's hegemony of what is considered academic today and the implications of this for theological education in the non-Western world. Second, exploring the new concept of "theological intelligence" (TQ) and its implications for other understanding of what is considered academic, especially for more orally-based pedagogical models. Third, looking at how one theological institution—Kairos University—is using Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE) to help bridge the gap between readers and non-readers in the academy. Finally, the article concludes with recommendations for theological institutions and educators. It is hoped that this rethinking of what academics is will help theological institutions worldwide better meet the training needs of the Christian constituencies that they serve, including oral and oral-preference learners.

This article is adapted from Caldwell (2022).

Introduction

Jesus told us not to put new wine into old wineskins (Lk. 5:37-39, NIV). Instead, he argued that "new wine must be poured into new wineskins." Unfortunately, theological institutions for the past two centuries have not considered Jesus' words when creating curricula for the greater Church and the training of her pastors and missionaries. Theological institutions, in fact, have been and still are discriminating against one of the larger constituencies of Christendom: oral and oral-preference learners. These institutions are forcing the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners into the old wineskins of curricula based on the needs of a reading minority. Of course, both oral and oral-preference learners have been around

since time immemorial. What is "new" in the "new wine" of today is the fairly recent recognition among dominant reading cultures that there are indeed vast numbers of both oral and oral-preference peoples throughout the world. The "orality movement" itself is indicative of such recognition.

As a result, it is time to carefully consider why being able to read is equated with academic standards of excellence while not being able to read is equated, at least by academia, or "the academy," with ignorance and inability to think in academic ways. We desperately need to rethink the old wineskins of what is considered "academic" as we try to meet the training needs of the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners who are pastors and missionaries today. Why do we need to do this? Because theological

education, as it currently stands in all its deference to an understanding of the "academic" that is reading dominant, will never meet the theological training needs of the vast majority of pastors and missionaries worldwide who are oral or oral-preference learners. Furthermore, the vast majority of theological institutions worldwide turn a blind eye to the oral realities of their learners, learners who either come from (and will return to) oral contexts or learners (both Western and non-Western) who may know how to read but who prefer not to.

What this rethinking requires is an embracing of an entirely new philosophy of how theological education is done. This includes how theological institutions view what is and what is not considered "academic." Traditionally, an understanding of academic is viewed from the perspective of the old wineskins of the academy, where students typically listen passively to lectures, read lots of books and articles, do research and write papers, take tests, and so on, often done in isolated settings far removed from contact with regular people. While none of these aspects of the old wineskins need to be abandoned out of hand, what is traditionally considered academic must be carefully reassessed in light of the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners.

This article will explore the new academic wineskins that are needed in four parts: first, examining the hegemony of the academy's understanding of what is considered academic that currently dominants theological education worldwide and the implications of such an understanding; second, examining "Theological Intelligence" (TQ) and how it might help theological institutions better incorporate other understandings of what is academic, especially more orally-based pedagogical models; third, showing how one theological institution, Kairos University, is using Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE) to help bridge the gap between readers and non-readers in the academy. The article concludes with several recommendations for theological institutions and educators.

But first, I would like to begin with the story of a leader named Jing. His story is a composite of several individuals I have known over the years.

Jing became a follower of Jesus as a young boy in a remote rural tribal area of a non-Western country. Most of his tribal group were non-readers. Though he had some "formal" schooling, the local reader-dominant educational system was rudimentary at best; Jing could read at the fourth-grade level. However, Jing was steeped in the more "informal" local oral cultural ways of his people and, as a teenager, distinguished himself in his ability to communicate the Bible in ways that made sense with both his fellow teenagers as well as with his elders in the community. He often preached in the small bamboo and thatched-roof local church, and all spoke well of him. A Western missionary to Jing's tribal group observed his leadership gifting and convinced Jing's family to send him several hundred miles away to the nearest city to attend Bible college and receive formal Bible training. Since no one in their family, and few in the area, had ever gone away to college, everyone was excited about Jing's opportunity.

Jing, however, struggled at the Bible college, especially at first. Though intellectually gifted, he had never studied so hard in his life: reading books, writing assignments, taking written quizzes and tests—all far away from his own family and people. In his mind, what he learned at the Bible college was like having to learn an entirely new way of thinking. Somehow, though, Jing made it through Bible college; in fact, he excelled. When he went back home during the summers, his local friends and family started to find it more and more difficult to understand what Jing was talking about when he was invited to preach. For now, when he preached, he often spoke of context, original languages, and what so-and-so Western person said about the Bible. Every time he preached, he had three points that he wanted to get across. To his friends and family, it was almost as if Jing was speaking a foreign language; he seldom referred to aspects of his own culture.

Jing himself grew increasingly frustrated every time he journeyed home. However, he did so well in Bible college that, upon graduation, he

was given a big scholarship by the Western missionaries to travel to an even larger city for a seminary education. Here, Jing again excelled, but he didn't go home as often, and when he did, he really didn't have much in common with his own people. Eventually, Jing ended up teaching at the seminary in the big city. He seldom returned home, and when he did, he was rarely invited to speak in church.

At least five observations emerge from Jing's story. First, Jing was extracted from his own culture and cognitive environment. One's cognitive environment encompasses a "set of assumptions which the individual is capable of mentally representing and accepting as true," including "a person's current and potential matrix of ideas memories, experiences and perceptions" (Higgins, 2010, p. 190). Second, Jing's local orality-based cognitive environment and oral system of learning were not considered adequate for church leadership by the Western missionary; the missionary acquainted formal academic training with ministry success. Third, similarly, the Western missionary thought that Jing needed to learn another educational system—a reading preference system—in order to excel in his spiritual gifts. Fourth, Jing struggled to learn the new reading culture but soon viewed it as superior to his own oral culture's learning style. Finally, as Jing's new reading-culture knowledge and ability grew, he increasingly could not communicate with his own people.

Unfortunately, Jing's story has been, and continues to be, reproduced around the world. While there are many reasons for this a basic one comes down to the unquestioned dominance of the reading culture worldwide.

Part 1: The Hegemony of the Reading Culture of the Academy

Though the motivations of the Western missionaries in Jing's story were not malevolent, the fact is they were rooted in a colonial mentality of "West is best," including the Western reading-dominant educational system. Elsewhere (see Caldwell 2013; cf. Caldwell 2010, 2018, and 2025), I have written on colonization and its effects on theological and missiological education, especially in the dismissing of local ways of teaching and learning. In summary:

> Colonization—and the resulting paternalism that has oftentimes remained—has affected theological and missiological education in many ways, but primarily with regards to curriculum relevance and to dismissing local ways of teaching and learning. Recent ethnographic research has come to label the influence of colonization as "authoritative knowledge." A result of colonization is that those who are colonized eventually take on as authoritative a certain way of thinking or knowing that was at first foreign to that particular culture. (Caldwell, 2013, p. 5)

It is the concept of authoritative knowledge that is especially pertinent to any discussion of the place of orality in theological institutions, both past and present. Brigitte Jordan (1997) expands on the oftentimes insidious role of authoritative knowledge:

> … frequently one kind of knowledge gains ascendance and legitimacy. A consequence of the legitimation of one kind of knowing as authoritative is the devaluation, often the dismissal, of all other kinds of knowing. … The constitution of authoritative knowledge is an ongoing social process that both builds and reflects power relationships within a community of practice. It does this in such a way that all participants come to see the current social order as a natural order, that is, the way things (obviously) are. (p. 56)

Compare these words with those of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), who refers to authoritative knowledge as "civilized knowledge," whereby "[t]he globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge" (p. 66).

One example of the legitimization of Western culture on theology involves the Bible and its interpretation. Today, around the world, one Western understanding of hermeneutics dominates: the grammatical-historical approach. However, as good as it may be, the grammatical-historical approach came with the colonizers and was soon accepted as "authoritative" by those who were colonized (cf. Caldwell, 1999 and 2025). This acceptance led to the neglecting of local forms of hermeneutics, most of which were orally based, as indeed was the Bible itself (see Steffen and Bjoraker, 2020 and Acker, 2024; cf. Barber, 2007 and Moon, 2009). Unfortunately, this foreign understanding of what Bible interpretation should be still dominates all theological institutions worldwide.

This example resonates with the case of Jing. The American colonizers, including Western missionaries, brought a foreign understanding of what formal Bible college should be. The colonized, Jing, and his tribal people saw such formal schooling and the required print-based learning as the way things should be done. So, of course, Jing was forced (even if it was voluntary) to adapt to an entirely new way of thinking and learning that he saw as authoritative and, therefore, did not question. He eventually viewed it as superior to his own culture's way of doing things and subsequently lost relevancy with his own people.

Unfortunately, Jing's experience continues to occur worldwide in theological institutions today. We must acknowledge, at the very least, that much of the curricula—as well as the educational models and techniques that are used—have been unquestionably set up the way the print-dominant colonizers did it. All parties have unquestionably assumed that print learning is superior to other learning approaches. However, it does not have to be this way. We must look for other alternatives, including using both curriculum and educational techniques, that are culturally appropriate for all learners, both

readers and non-readers alike. As George Spindler (1997) says:

> A transcultural perspective on education is essential, for education is a cultural process and occurs in a social context. Without attention to cultural difference and the way education serves those differences, we have no way of achieving perspective on our own culture and the way our educational system serves it or of building a comprehensive picture of education as affected by culture. (p. 272)

A transcultural perspective on education is imperative today, given the fact that, according to Lynn Thigpen (2020), only two percent of the world's population is able to read at the high level required for success in most theological institutions (p. 3). This, coupled with the fact that today there is an increasing number of oral-preference learners in the West (Moon, 2013a and 2013b; cf. his 2010 and 2012), means that all theological institutions—in the West and non-West—need to move beyond the old wineskins of the hegemony of the reading culture of the academy to new forms of education that will truly meet the needs of all learners, especially the new wine of oral and oral preference learners.

Part 2: How Theological Institutions Might Better Incorporate Oral-based Pedagogical Models

I believe one way that theological institutions today might better accommodate the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners is by viewing the individual learners in terms of what I call their "theological intelligence," or TQ. We are all familiar with IQ (the measurement of a person's reasoning ability or rational intelligence) and EQ (the measurement of a person's emotional intelligence). Like IQ and EQ, I would argue that every person also has a TQ. I define theological intelligence as follows (Caldwell, 2022):

Theological Intelligence (TQ) is the innate ability that every individual has to think theologically within the confines of their own cultural context and cognitive environment. They are able to do this through having mastered the techniques of their culturally appropriate educational systems (both informal and/or formal). As a result, each individual is able to successfully comprehend their culture's theology—and communicate that theology—to their own people in ways that are both culturally appropriate and understandable. (p. 70)

As Patricia Lamoureux (1999) points out, both IQ and EQ "are not inherently opposing competencies, but rather separate yet interconnected ones, ... which operate, for the most part, in tight harmony" (p. 143). In the same way, I would argue that an individual's TQ builds on and is connected with both their IQ and EQ.

Here is another way of saying all of this: TQ is the innate ability that every person utilizes to understand and express religious concepts and philosophies in terms of their own culture and cognitive environment. TQ is a fully orbed understanding of theology appropriately learned in one's cultural context. Whether Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, animist, or whatever, each individual has the TQ to both think theologically and to communicate those theological thoughts in ways that their unique cultures and cognitive environments have shaped. As a result, there are several sub-points in relation to TQ:

1. Every individual has a TQ. Individual TQs are developed over the lifetime of the individual, with foundational TQs typically in place by the individual's teenage years.
2. All TQ's are equal. There should be no privileging of one TQ over another; in other words, all learning styles that undergird one's TQ— whether reading-based or orally-based—are culturally conditioned.

Hence, all learning styles are valid and equal.
3. Cultures default to the TQ that works best for them in light of their own cognitive environment.
4. Both informal and formal educational systems within the culture will default to the culture's dominant TQ.

What all of this means for theological institutions worldwide is that we must both understand and value the individual TQs of our learners and take them seriously as we develop specific training programs. Unfortunately, most theological institutions tend to disregard the TQ of their learners. Instead, they typically default to the authoritative knowledge of reading cultures, to the neglect of the TQ of oral cultures, and, increasingly, to the TQ of their learners who are readers but who prefer oral learning. In the past, the academy, the "gatekeeper" of authoritative knowledge, determined that academic theological knowledge is best achieved through:

- book learning;
- credit hours and seat-time;
- a top-down process where the teacher pours content into the learner;
- independent research done silently in a library;
- results presented logically and systematically;
- assessment linked to quizzes, tests, and academic paper writing; and
- little concern for formation and practical application.

As a result, the academy concluded that anything considered to be "academic" needs to fall within the above parameters; it defaulted to an understanding of academic in terms of a typically privileged Western understanding of what TQ is. Any alternative TQ was categorized as inferior and "non-academic."

But here we must raise the question, "Who says?" Is defaulting to the hegemony of a

print-based reading TQ the only, or primary, way for theological education? I think not. Instead, I think that an understanding and valuing of all TQs causes us to redefine what is and what is not academic. As a result, the learning styles and educational methods worked out in the cognitive environments of oral and oral-preference learners should be equally considered academic. Such an oral-based academic TQ will consider the following elements:

- group learning that is connected and relational learning;
- learning achieved through both formal and informal gatherings of the community;
- learning that values "hands-on" learning experiences more than lectures;
- peer learning, where the "elder"/"teacher" guides the group in communal scholarship, coming to proper conclusions through extended and lively conversations;
- results—both individual and group—presented appropriately according to the cognitive environment of the specific group;
- assessment linked to the individual and group's ability to actually communicate theology to others in the same cultural context; and
- much concern for formation and practical application.

The elements listed here are but a select few. For additional elements, see Tom Steffen and William Bjoraker (2020, esp. pp. 65-72; cf. Steffen, 2010).

This is precisely where CBTE's educational philosophy can help us. Increasingly, there is a growing interest in theological educational models that are a hybrid: flexible enough to meet the educational needs of both reading-based and oral-based learners (cf. Seng, 2016). CBTE offers just such flexibility. My own experience at Kairos University demonstrates how such a hybrid might work.

Part 3: Kairos University and CBTE

For 160 years—like most seminaries—Kairos University (KU; formally known as Sioux Falls Seminary) was exclusively a reading-dominant seminary. Then, in 2014, KU developed and launched a CBTE model called the Kairos Project (for more information on KU's philosophy of CBTE see this link: https://kairos.edu/engage /white-papers/.) The Kairos Project is a whole new philosophy of how to do theological education, emphasizing theological education that is affordable, accessible, relevant, and faithful. It is the "accessible" and "relevant" pieces that are particularly germane to the topic of this article.

Accessibility and relevancy can be seen in a variety of ways. First, Kairos, as a CBTE model, emphasizes mentor teams (made up of a faculty mentor, a vocational mentor, a personal mentor, and the learner) who help learners achieve competency in outcomes specifically designed for their specific degree (ranging from the BA to the PhD). Second, because it is competency-based, Kairos emphasizes learning experiences that are accessible to those learners that God places in our midst, no matter where God has called them to serve or what learning style they prefer. Our primary goal is to meet learners where they are, both literally and figuratively. We take seriously the learner's TQ. Third, Kairos emphasizes the importance of the learner's vocational context and allows the mentor team to determine what kind of learning is most necessary and appropriate for the learner and how such learning should occur and be assessed. Fourth, Kairos seeks to fully integrate each learner's life, vocation, and calling into their educational journey of discipleship.

Accessibility and relevancy involve a key shift in thinking for all in the Kairos Project: learners and mentors alike. This key shift views knowledge as more than just content. I believe one of the past impediments to seeing the validity of oral learning was (and still is) the academy's limited understanding of

knowledge as primarily content. If academic knowledge is limited to content, and content is primarily gained through reading and writing, then to "be academic," a theological institution must have an educational pedagogy that defaults to the reading of written documents (printed texts and articles), as well as to the production of written documents (papers and written answers on tests and quizzes) that, taken together, somehow demonstrate the overall competency of their learners. Instead, for the Kairos Project, knowledge is defined as involving three essential pieces: content, character, and craft. This "three-fold" understanding of knowledge as a mutuality between content, character, and craft is the key to designing educational pedagogy—from start to finish—that can privilege both the reading learner and the oral learner, as well as the emerging oral preference learner. Of course, there has to be some content, but the more holistic three-fold view of character and craft allows us more pedagogical options.

So, how do accessibility and relevancy work out, practically speaking, at KU? Let me briefly touch on three ways. First, for KU, this means that though we still default to reading-related methodologies—since the majority of our learners still come from reading-dominant TQ cognitive environments—we at the same time recognize and value those learners whose TQs are more orally-based. We ask this simple question: How does the specific learner prefer to learn? As a result, some of us are trying to incorporate more stories into our lectures rather than just content monologues. We are also allowing ample time for group discussions on content presentations. For specific assignments, learners are usually given the option to either write a paper or prepare an oral video response. Though textbooks are still used, we allow learners to find print or oral parallels in their own language or trade language for greater clarity. Likewise, by seeing knowledge as content, character, and craft, we use the vocational mentor to help us. Here, the vocational context in which

ministry for the learner happens helps determine what is considered "academic" for that specific vocational context. Likewise, if the vocational context is primarily oral, then presentations that demonstrate competency will be more orally based, especially if this is the TQ of the learner as well.

Secondly, since most oral TQ learners typically come from, and will return to, ministry in oral-based vocational contexts, we here at KU are seeing that learning and assessment should be adapted to methodologies that are more typically oral. We give both reading-dominant and oral-dominant learners the opportunity to write up a response to an assignment or to present their results orally, oftentimes through a video report. Unfortunately, oftentimes, reader-dominant academics view such video reporting as less than academic. The truth of the matter, however, is that oral summations or presentations are not necessarily easy. They can entail much thought and preparation, oftentimes involving the same amount of time as the preparation of a written document.

Thirdly, we here at KU are finding that increased sensitivity to oral and oral preference learners also includes peer learning in groups, working on and presenting assignments as a group, and even group assessment. This latter item—group assessment—is one of the hardest aspects for the academy to grasp. Assessments have become so individualized that we seldom think that there might be another way. The fact is, all types of learning can be evaluated in terms of knowledge acquisition, ability to function within the explicit TQ category, and whether or not the resulting applications are relevant to particular TQ contexts. At KU, all learners have the same targets for the various outcomes, but they are allowed to demonstrate competence according to their unique learning styles and cultural backgrounds.

CBTE is an emerging alternative to the old wineskins of the academy. CBTE's emphasis on contextual learning, team-based mentoring, integrated outcomes, adapted

assignments, and especially competency in ministry may help theological institutions make the changes necessary in their understanding of what is academic, especially for the new wine of oral and oral preference learners.

Part 4: Recommendations for Theological Institutions and Educators

There are many recommendations of this study for theological institutions as well as for those who both teach and learn in such theological institutions. I will address a few of the most pertinent.

Recommendations for Theological Institutions

Pay attention to theological intelligence (TQ). We of the academy must admit that our place of privilege and power has caused us to default to the old wineskins of the academy and its understanding of what is and what is not considered academic. As a result, we focus on the TQ of readers (where we are most comfortable) and embrace a print culture and the print technology that goes along with it. This default has been to the detriment of oral and oral-preference learners. Such privilege and power have no place in theological institutions today, especially as we seek to help meet the training needs of the global Church. We must acknowledge the mistakes of our past and agree to move forward to better understand the TQ of all of our learners, including oral and oral-preference learners.

Develop appropriate curricula. We academics need to develop curricula, courses, and other academic learning experiences with the TQ needs of oral and oral-preference learners in mind. This is especially crucial in academic settings (particularly in the non-Western world), where the majority of learners come from oral and oral-preference cultures.

Adjust assignments and assessments appropriately. We of the academy need to rethink our propensity towards individualized assignments and assessments, which must be rethought in light of the needs of oral and oral-preference learners. This will involve less attention to individualized learning and evaluation and more attention to the involvement of the group in both processes. Developing both learning outcomes and assessment tools that more holistically deal with learners, regardless of specific reading or oral learning preferences, will aid both groups.

Recommendations for Educators

Embrace the TQ challenge. Value the TQs of your individual learners, and be willing to adjust your courses, teaching styles, assignments, and assessments accordingly. For most educators, this will be a huge challenge. But, given the realities of the leadership needs of the worldwide Church today, we have no other choice.

Exercise humility. Since we educators have oftentimes enjoyed the privilege and power of academia, we oftentimes expect others to go through the same challenges in their educational journeys that we were forced to go through. But what we must all come to see is that, for example, learning the Chicago Manual of Style—and being able to cite sources, footnote, and compile bibliographies correctly, and the like—really has nothing whatsoever to do with whether or not something is to be considered academic. The reality is that those in academic power have invented such supposedly "academic standards" which result in—paraphrasing here the apostle Peter—"putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Ac. 15:10, NIV). We educators must move beyond our privilege and power (and, I daresay, our pride) and thereby truly meet our learners where they are at. All of our learners, including oral and oral-preference learners.

Recognize that it will not be quick and easy. Do not expect quick solutions to the reality of the educational needs of oral and

oral-preference learners. Be in it for the long haul. Changing curricula, courses, teaching styles, assignments, and assessments is a marathon, not a sprint.

Conclusion

Theological institutions have a long journey ahead in redefining the old wineskins of what is and what is not "academic" in light of the new wine of oral and oral-preference learners. Nevertheless, a growing awareness of oral and oral-preference learners and their unique educational needs is beginning to happen. The educational philosophy which undergirds CBTE is one model for the way forward.

I dream that the Jings of our world will soon be able to receive a theological education that is indeed both accessible and relevant. Furthermore, I dream that oral and oral-preference learners like Jing will no longer be regarded as "second-class citizens" in the world of the academy. Instead, their educational backgrounds and learning preferences will be respected and utilized just like those of the dominant reading cultures. When this happens, theological institutions worldwide will be closer to truly meeting the training needs of the Christian constituencies that they serve.

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Oral Hermeneutics in Theological Education

Laurence B. Gatawa

Abstract: Oral hermeneutics provides an important framework for theological education by empha-sizing the oral foundations of Scripture and their relevance in contemporary interpretation. The transmission of the Gospel began in oral form before it was written, shaping the way early commu-nities understood and communicated biblical narratives. While Walter Ong's Great Divide Theory distinguishes between orality and literacy, recent scholarship argues for an orality-literacy contin-uum, recognizing the interplay between spoken and written traditions. An oral-aural hermeneutic, informed by narrative criticism and social memory, highlights the communal and dynamic nature of interpretation. Oral performance further deepens engagement with Scripture, making its message more vivid and participatory. In the digital age, oral hermeneutics bridges traditional oral cultures with emerging technologies, enriching theological education and fostering a more rounded under-standing of Scripture.

This paper was originally presented at the Orality Webinar on November 14, 2024, available online at https://oralitytalks.net/oral-ity-in-theological-education/. It has been ed-ited into its current format with the assis-tance of ChatGPT.

Introduction

In today's digital age, theological education must navigate the intersection of modern technology and the continuing influence of oral traditions. Oral hermeneutics—rooted in biblical traditions from the spoken words of prophets to the communal interpretation of texts—remains essential for understand-ing Scripture within its original cultural con-text.

Tom Steffen and William Bjoraker (2020) understand Oral Hermeneutics (OH) as an interpretive method that enhances the un-derstanding of biblical narratives by examin-ing character interactions, actions, and set-tings within their historical and cultural con-texts (p. 128). While recognizing the diverse approaches to OH worldwide, as highlighted by Steffen and Bjoraker, the framework I ap-ply in points 5, 6, and 7 centers on how texts were originally heard and understood by audiences in predominantly oral societies. This approach emphasizes memory, perfor-mance, and communal engagement in the in-terpretive process.

Coming from Ifugao province, I have per-sonally witnessed the dynamic interplay be-tween orality and literacy in a society under-going cultural transition. Steffen and Bjoraker highlight the ongoing significance of oral traditions, drawing from Steffen's 15 years of missionary experience among the Ifugao people. His observations reinforce the power of storytelling, a perspective echoed in Larry Caldwell's (1999) ethnohermeneu-tics, which advocates for culturally contextu-alized biblical interpretation (pp. 21–43).

This presentation explores the historical foundations of OH, key theoretical frame-works—including Ong's "Great Divide," so-cial memory, and performance criticism—and their applications in theological educa-tion. It also presents how orality and literacy can coexist in the digital age, enriching theo-logical training and broadening approaches to biblical interpretation.

Oral Tradition Before the Written Gospels

The study of orality provides valuable insight into the pre-literary phase of the Gospels. Before they were written, the teachings and actions of Jesus were preserved and transmitted orally within the early Christian community. This oral tradition served as the foundation for what would later be recorded in the written Gospels.

Scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann (1963) have explored this process through form criticism, a method that classifies oral traditions into distinct categories, such as miracle stories, parables, and sayings. Form criticism seeks to identify, analyze, and interpret these individual units of oral material that circulated within the early church before being committed to writing.

However, Werner Kelber (1873) critiques form criticism for its limitations, particularly its failure to develop an OH, its flawed pursuit of original oral forms, its dependence on redaction criticism's linear reconstruction of tradition, and its tendency to view written Gospels merely as extensions of oral tradition (p. xv). This critique highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how oral and written traditions interact in the transmission of the Gospel message.

Orality vs. Literacy: Ong's Great Divide Theory

Walter Ong's (1982) "Great Divide" theory examines how societies transform as they transition from oral to written communication. In oral cultures, knowledge is preserved through storytelling, memory, and communal participation. Instead of abstract categorization, information is stored and transmitted through narratives, shaping a shared understanding of the world (p. 137). This dynamic process fosters a collective and relational approach to knowledge, where meaning is constantly negotiated through dialogue and lived experience.

With the advent of literacy, knowledge becomes more fixed and structured. Writing allows for the preservation and standardization of ideas, making information less dependent on memory and communal interaction. Scholars like Werner Kelber highlight how this shift profoundly influenced early Christianity, as the move from oral Gospel traditions to written texts altered theological interpretation and community identity. While literacy helped establish doctrinal consistency and ecclesiastical authority, it also introduced the risk of rigid interpretations, limiting the adaptability that oral traditions once provided.

This divide continues to shape education and religious practice today. Many cultures still rely on oral traditions, yet formal theological study often prioritizes written texts. Recognizing the strengths of both modes of communication allows for a more holistic approach to learning. By integrating storytelling, discussion, and performance, theological education can bridge the gap between orality and literacy, ensuring that biblical narratives remain accessible and meaningful across diverse cultural contexts.

Orality-Literacy Continuum: Development Against Ong's Great Divide

The rigid divide between orality and literacy has been challenged by scholars who argue for an orality-literacy continuum. While Walter Ong's "Great Divide" theory posits a fundamental cognitive and cultural shift between oral and literate societies, later studies have shown that orality and literacy often coexist. Milman Parry and Albert Lord initially treated oral and literate traditions as mutually exclusive, but this perspective has since evolved. As John Miles Foley (1999) critiques, earlier scholars confidently labeled entire societies as either oral or literate, ignoring the fluid interactions between the two (p. 2).

Susan Niditch's concept of an oral-literate continuum highlights how oral traditions

shape written texts, particularly in biblical literature. Her research on ancient Israelite culture reveals that Israelites lived in an oral-dominant world, where storytelling, communal memory, and spoken transmission played a significant role even as writing developed. This blending of oral and literate elements is evident in the Bible, where written texts often retain oral structures, rhetorical patterns, and mnemonic devices. Niditch (1996) argues that the power of biblical narratives comes from this dynamic interplay between oral tradition and written form (p. 44).

The orality-literacy continuum challenges the notion that literacy inevitably replaces orality. Instead, it recognizes that cultures adapt and integrate both modes of communication in complex ways. This perspective enriches our understanding of ancient texts and informs modern approaches to theological education. By acknowledging the oral roots of biblical literature, educators can bridge the gap between traditional storytelling and written analysis, fostering a deeper engagement with scripture in both oral and literate contexts.

Oral-Aural Hermeneutic: From Narrative Criticism to an Oral-Narrative Approach

Biblical interpretation has long been shaped by narrative criticism, which treats Scripture as a written text. However, growing awareness of the oral-aural nature of ancient storytelling has led to an oral-narrative approach—one that focuses on how early audiences would have heard and responded to biblical narratives. This shift is especially relevant for the Gospel of Mark, which was likely composed with performance in mind. Rather than reading in isolation, early Christians experienced Scripture collectively, shaping its interpretation and impact.

In the first century, literacy rates were low—only 2-3% in Israel and 5-8% in the Roman world (Hezser, 2001; Bar-Ilan, 1992, p. 56)—so oral proclamation was the primary way people encountered Scripture. Public readings and spoken performances were central to worship and theological formation. The rhythmic and emotive nature of oral delivery conveyed meaning in ways that written text could not. Thus, in my dissertation, I emphasize that the Gospels were shaped for oral reception, designed to be performed and heard rather than silently read (Gatawa, 2016).

My dissertation explores this perspective by asking: *How might Mark's target audience have heard and understood the characterizations of Jesus and the disciples in the first-century oral context?* I argue that Mark's narrative functioned as a dramatized ideological clash, persuading listeners rather than silent readers to follow Jesus and join his community.

Recognizing this oral-aural dimension has important implications for theological education today. Encouraging communal readings, dramatizations, and discussions about the auditory aspects of Scripture helps recover its performative nature.

Oral Hermeneutics and Social Memory

OH is deeply connected to social memory, a concept introduced by Maurice Halbwachs (1992) as *collective memory* (p. 38). Eric Eve (2016) explains that social memory is not about objectively preserving past events but about how communities reinterpret and reshape the past to serve their present identity and needs (p. 107–108). In early Christianity, this communal process played a key role in how Jesus' teachings and actions were remembered, transmitted, and understood. Rather than static recollections, these memories were active, performative, and shaped by the needs of the believing community.

For Mark's audience, social memory would have influenced how they engaged with his narrative. Mark intentionally connected Jesus' ministry to Israel's traditions, using the number 12 as a symbolic link to the twelve tribes of Israel. This is particularly

evident in *Jairus' Daughter and the Bleeding Woman* (Mark 5:21-43), where Mark employs his well-known sandwich technique (intercalation)—interrupting one story with another to create a deeper connection between them.

- The bleeding woman had suffered for 12 years, and Jairus' daughter was 12 years old when she died.
- Their conditions reflected Israel's suffering and spiritual decline—a nation sick and in need of restoration.
- Jairus, a synagogue leader, represented Israel's leadership, which was powerless to heal or restore the people.
- Only Jesus could bring healing and new life, showing himself as Israel's true hope and healer.

By structuring the narrative this way, Mark encourages his audience to interpret these miracles as a single theological statement: Israel, like the bleeding woman and Jairus' daughter, is in desperate need of

> BIBLICAL WORDS WERE NOT MERELY RECORDS TO BE ANALYZED BUT PROCLAMATIONS THAT DEMANDED A RESPONSE.

Jesus' restoration. The interplay between the two stories would have evoked strong associations in the minds of Mark's listeners, reinforcing Jesus' messianic role and the urgency of following him.

Thus, biblical words were not merely records to be analyzed but proclamations that demanded a response. In an oral-aural culture, hearing Scripture was a participatory experience—one that invited imagination, interpretation, and action. Recognizing this dynamic allows us to recover the performative power of Scripture, making biblical engagement today more immersive and transformative.

Oral Performance and Oral Hermeneutics

Biblical texts in the ancient world were not merely read but performed, engaging audiences in communal interpretation (Rhoads, 2006). Oral traditions, as John Miles Foley (1995) highlights, relied on audience participation (p. 137), shaping the storytelling process in real time. Thus, it is emphasized herein that early Christian texts were not static writings but dynamic performances designed to evoke emotional and theological responses.

Gestures, vocal tone, and rhythm reinforced the message, making interpretation a shared and embodied experience rather than a private intellectual exercise. This performative aspect shaped how biblical narratives were not only delivered but also received, ensuring that meaning was created collectively within a community rather than being confined to individual reflection.

The Gospel of Mark assumes its reader is not a silent observer but an oral performer. This is evident in Jesus' eschatological discourse: "When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" (Mk. 13:14, NIV). The phrase "let the reader understand" suggests that the one reading aloud (not in silent or private) must grasp and effectively communicate the significance of the prophecy. Similarly, Col. 4:16 commands the public reading and circulation of letters, reinforcing the performative nature of early Christian texts and their role in shaping communal identity and response.

One of the most striking examples of oral performance in Mark is its abrupt ending: "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8, NIV). While Mark begins

with "The beginning of the good news" (Mark 1:1, NIV), it closes in fear rather than resolution. In an oral performance, this unsettling conclusion would leave hearers in suspense, confronting them with a decision—will they remain silent like the women at the tomb, or will they obey the angel's command and proclaim the resurrection? The ending demands participation, turning passive listeners into active bearers of the good news, effectively drawing them into the unfolding story.

Towards an Oral Hermeneutics in a Digital Age

In the digital age, the resurgence of orality—what we now call "digital orality" (Cutler, Ahmar, & Bahri, 2022)—demonstrates the enduring power of spoken and performed communication. Social media, podcasts, and video platforms have created an oral-literate hybrid culture, where storytelling thrives through both text and voice. Just as early Christian communities relied on trained public readers to deliver Scripture effectively, the digital landscape nowadays, requires new skills that integrate literacy, orality, and visual engagement.

This shift presents both challenges and opportunities for biblical interpretation and theological education. Traditionally, seminaries have prioritized textual literacy, but the rise of oral learners—those who primarily process information through sound, narrative, and imagery—calls for a rethinking of pedagogical methods. The increasing relevance of orality is evident in global theological discussions, such as the recent Asia Theological Association (ATA) forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand (Nov. 12–15, 2024), where scholars explored ways to integrate oral and digital communication into biblical studies, homiletics, and missions.

As performance criticism and oral hermeneutics continue to shape biblical studies, their intersection with digital orality offers new ways to experience Scripture. Whether in ancient house churches or today's digital spaces, biblical narratives are meant to be proclaimed, heard, and embodied in communal settings. Digital platforms allow for interactive engagement with Scripture, where voice, gesture, and visual media enhance interpretation and theological reflection.

The future of oral hermeneutics lies at the intersection of ancient traditions and emerging digital realities. Theological education must equip students not only to analyze texts but to perform, communicate, and translate them for contemporary audiences. In a world where information is increasingly shared through speech, sound, and visuals, the church must ensure that the Word remains both spoken and heard across generations, for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rm. 10:17, NKJV).

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Oral Ethics: How can Oral Hermeneutics Build a Christian Ethic?

Caroline Reel

Abstract: *Few lay Christians routinely practice the disciplines of ethics and hermeneutics confidently and appropriately. Many who have learned to practice these disciplines often leave that knowledge to gather dust between the covers of a textbook. This paper discusses how the various folklore or literary genres in the Bible are particularly suited for the study and practice of the three branches of Christian ethics. Lessons built on spiral logic or pedagogy patterns can use the genres of myth to teach meta-ethics, prescriptive narrative, and others for normative ethics, as well as descriptive narrative to teach and enact applied ethics. The practice of oral hermeneutics may pair with this course of study to deliver that ethical material from Scripture effectively to the oral majority or anyone who desires not only to **learn** ethics but to **live** them.*

Listen to Caroline talk about her article.

Some of this content has been adapted and updated from portions of an unpublished M.A. research project thesis, "The Storied Ethic," submitted by the author to the faculty of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2018.

In the United States right now, at the beginning of a new presidential term, many standing government policies are under review and subject to rapid change (Kanno-Youngs, 2025). Some resulting policy changes disallow or make it more difficult for refugees and immigrants to enter or remain in the country (Dias, 2025). Christians in the USA are faced with the quandary of how to respond as citizens, as neighbors, and as churches toward public opinions and worldviews fighting to shape their relationships with refugees and immigrants. These are ethical questions: How should I act toward undocumented immigrants in my community; what motives and values should shape my interactions with newly arrived refugee families facing fresh obstacles; what responsibility do I or my church have to engage with the government or people within or outside our community about these issues? However, the Bible does not answer these questions directly. It does not explicitly tell twenty-first-century believers in the US what border and immigration policies they should vote for, how to treat classmates who fear deportation, or what to do for the new refugee family in town who just lost promised government assistance meeting their daily needs. These are all hermeneutic questions: what does the Bible say about how believers should treat foreigners; can it tell us what responsibilities governments and followers of God have to foreigners who live among us, and how should we apply any passages about refugees and immigrants in our lives to build our own ethical framework?

In many circles, ethics and hermeneutics are functionally practiced as academic theological disciplines. When this happens, the responsibility to answer the questions above and others like them can be left in the hands of theologians or church leaders. However, Christian ethics forms a person's sense of right and wrong and helps them determine what to do in any given situation. Similarly, hermeneutics is the art and science of how to faithfully interpret Scripture (Mburu, 2019, p. 19) so a person can understand and apply God's word in his or her own life. Every Christian has a responsibility to practice both of these disciplines. They should

develop their own sense of right and wrong, and if they want that moral code to come from the Bible, they should be able to practice hermeneutics for themselves. So, how can we place the key of hermeneutics into the hands of believers who will never step foot in a seminary or crack the spine of a theology textbook? How can we equip the oral majority to unlock biblical truths so they can use God's word to practice ethics themselves and live a faithful Christian life? Oral hermeneutics happens to be a perfect key for that lock. The practice of oral hermeneutics equips the oral majority to engage in the theological discipline of ethics fruitfully. It turns out that the literary genres of the Bible speak from different angles to form a well-rounded Christian ethic. Moreover, oral hermeneutics can make those genres particularly accessible to oral learners through spiral logic using a sequence of Scripture passages from different genres to address the same ethical issue.

Scriptural Genres Relate to the Branches of Ethics

To begin with, it seems God sovereignly chose the various genres of the Bible to empower oral learners in their ethical endeavors. These genres make God's word and its ethical system accessible, and the practice of oral hermeneutics lifts that Christian ethic off of the page and puts it into the hearts and hands of believers. The three main branches of ethics—meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics each have corresponding genres in Scripture that seem divinely designed to teach their content. As we will see later, oral hermeneutics is particularly suited to these same genres, narrative, and wisdom. This approach, along with the corresponding "character theology" its practitioners tend to develop, oral hermeneutics makes Scripture easily accessible to anyone (Steffen & Bjoraker, 2020, pp. 109, 194).

> ORAL HERMENEUTICS EQUIPS THE ORAL MAJORITY TO ENGAGE IN THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINE OF ETHICS FRUITFULLY.

Myth for Meta-Ethics

The first folklore genre in Scripture well-suited to ethical teaching is **myth**, and it corresponds to the branch of ethics called **meta-ethics**. Biblical stories align with folklore genres around the world, and within African contexts, for example, that parallel is a cultural hermeneutic tool to leverage for deeper understanding of scriptural truth. In African contexts, and many others, the genre of **myth** explains origins, right from wrong, how to live, and why things are the way they are today (2019, pp. 139-147).

You may worry that anything called "myth" is inherently false, but that is not the case for Christian myths set down in the Bible. C. S. Lewis (1970) said it best:

> The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth,* comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences.... By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth; that is the miracle. (pp. 66-67)

So, the genre of myth is a sacred cultural vehicle of deep truths, but Christian myth in the Bible is *factually true* even while it carries the deeper dimensions of meta-ethics. The Bible's myths teach the mind as well as the spirit and imagination in order to use love, obedience, wonder, and delight in service of understanding truths about God, goodness, right, and wrong (p. 67). And those truths are the territory of meta-ethics.

So, what exactly is **meta-ethics**? This subfield of ethics forms the basis for any worldview and the ethical system that springs from it. Its job is to define the concepts of right, wrong, moral obligation, good, and evil and to explain *how* or *why* an action

may be considered justified (Feinberg, 2010, p. 22). Meta-ethics is the part of theology that explains why we need the field of ethics in the first place: it shapes the discipline and gives it a goal. Christian meta-ethics, by nature, is subject to Scripture (Frame, 2008, p. 12), so the Word of God itself expresses and forms the practice. Meta-ethical information is often found in the moral law, which comes from and reflects God's character and sets it as the standard for the human character (Jones, 2013, p. 208). These laws exist eternally like God himself, but they were first fully stated from Mount Sinai (pp. 59-60). Moral law is often indicated or grounded in creation stories and the character of God, the topics of the genre of myth. The Ten Commandments, for example, credit their basis for creation and God's character. The list begins with, "I am the Lord your God," and gives rationalizations like, "for I, the Lord, am a jealous God," and "for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day" (*NIV Bible*, 2002, Ex. 20:2, 5, 11).

God's character, purposes, and foundational interactions with humanity show most clearly in the mythic stories of Scripture, so it is in this genre that meta-ethics finds its home. What is goodness, who is God, and how does he interact with humankind? These are the questions answered in the mythic portions of Scripture: creation, the fall, the tower of Babel, the incarnation, and the crucifixion and resurrection. Stories answer big worldview questions, like "Who am I? Where am I? What has gone wrong? What can be done about it?" (Chiang et al., 2005, p. 33). More specifically, myth stories target these questions because the myth genre answers deep and difficult questions about who God is, what he is like, and what humanity should think about him. These mythic stories are the best shot humanity has at explaining the difficult abstract ideas of meta-ethics, like goodness, divinity, and holiness: "if we can't describe God, if our language is not adequate," we create art or tell stories that describe "the ultimate, unqualified mystery [that] is beyond human experience" (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 228). Myth expresses these abstract realities in concrete form (Lewis, 1970, p. 66).

Myth is such a fertile ground for meta-ethics because the true Christian myths of the Bible express the deepest conceivable nature of reality. These *truthier* truths, like "God is good," are the concerns of theological foundations, meta-ethics, and myth. Steffen and Neu share the story of a student perplexed about how to lead a Bible study for non-readers who cannot underline or circle the important truths (2024, p. 140). The myths in the Bible may be the answer: they are the genre equivalent of a narrative underline. Mythic stories, by their very nature, highlight or underscore the most foundational truths of a worldview and an ethical system. Who can fail to feel the greater emphasis of "In the beginning God created…" compared to any five other words taken from elsewhere in Scripture (*NIV Bible*, 2002, Gn. 1:1)?

Prescriptive Narrative, Law, and Wisdom for Normative Ethics

The next branch of ethics is called **normative ethics**, and it relates to several of Scripture's genres: **prescriptive narrative, law, and wisdom**. If meta-ethics is the foundation for an ethical system, normative ethics is its framework. **Normative ethics** deals with specific actions and determining whether they are right or wrong, moral obligations or morally despicable (Feinberg, 2010, p. 22). This branch outlines the principles we use to make moral decisions in everyday life. As with meta-ethics, normative ethics depends on Scripture (Frame, 2008, p. 14), in this case, as God's revealed **moral norms**. These **moral norms** are the objective principles or standards of ethics (Jones, 2013, p. 208), and they are easy to locate in Scripture as the passages that present objective moral standards before they are applied in a culturally specific situation.

Portions of Scripture with moral law show up again here. They serve as guiding norms because these laws are timeless, and they are not nullified or modified from the Old Covenant to the New (Jones, 2013, p. 61). Moral norms can come only from a revelation of God's character and declaration of how humanity should model that character (Frame, 2008, p. 125). Therefore, any ethical content expressed in the Bible consistently from one Testament to the other qualifies as a moral norm and is in the territory of normative ethics. These passages are found in the Wisdom genres—Psalms, Proverbs, and James, to name a few. These genres teach that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. If the Lord does not change, and if his wisdom expresses his nature, these expressions are immutable moral norms (Jas. 1:5, 17). Mburu (2019) confirms that wisdom genres can teach moral norms when she discusses how the comparable African genres so compellingly and powerfully teach right from wrong (p. 175). Moral norms are also expressed in the teachings of the Law found in both Old and New Testaments: for example, the Ten Commandments, virtue and vice lists in the epistles, and sermons and wisdom teachings Jesus taught.

However, Wisdom and Law are not Scripture's only genres that supply normative ethics. **Prescriptive narratives** also provide normative ethical material. **Prescriptive narratives** are stories that declare God's Word or include evaluations of what ought, should, or must be done or not done (Feinberg, 2010, p. 23). These narratives often include teaching and moral norms like the wisdom literature. However, they also include the prophets' and New Testament teachers' declarations marked by signal words and phrases: "the Lord is not pleased with…," "thus says the Lord…," "obey…," and "do not…." These expressions of normative ethics are often more deeply immersed in cultural and historical context than those in wisdom lore, so they sometimes take more teasing out of the narratives so that people from other cultures and times may learn

what timeless moral norm is at the heart of such a declaration. Mburu (2019) explains this is also the case with the proverb genre in particular because these short statements express something generally true but are not guaranteed to predict or describe experiences accurately all the time (p. 173). Proverbs are not meant to express unchanging moral imperatives. So, like prescriptive narratives, these portions of God's word must be handled carefully to determine the moral norm behind them and how that norm should shape ethical decisions in different cultural-historical contexts.

This is exactly where oral hermeneutics shines because some of its principles specifically address how to navigate precarious waters like these when believers need to discern a moral norm that is not explicitly stated in a passage and determine how to apply it in their own *different* context. One of the guiding principles of oral hermeneutics is the necessity of both knowing the whole story of the Bible and situating each new piece learned where it belongs within that story (Steffen & Bjoraker, 2020, p. 113). Scripture's grand narrative is the framework we use to understand any given passage in much the same way that normative ethics is the framework we use to assess the morality of any given action. This discernment happens in the dialogue section of a Bible storying session when the storyteller directs the listeners to identify the moral norm by using other Bible passages to interpret the tricky one. For example, if the storying group cannot tell if Paul's injunction for Timothy to drink wine applies to them (1 Tm. 5:23), they consider if Scripture elsewhere commands, commends, or condemns this practice. Not only that, but oral hermeneutics can also get at moral norms by demonstrating those abstract traits of God's character we are to reflect through the story itself (Steffen & Bjoraker, 2020, p. 186), like faith through the life of Abraham, or God's justice through the prophets' messages, or holiness through prophetic throne room visions. This process and these narrative and wisdom genres

teach oral learners hermeneutical principles to help them determine cross-cultural moral norms.

Descriptive Narrative for Applied Ethics

The last branch of ethics is **applied ethics**, and it can be found most richly in the Bible's **descriptive narratives**. Meta-ethics is the foundation, normative ethics is the frame, and applied ethics is the finishing touches that make a house livable. We get applied ethics when we build our lives around the timeless moral norms in God's word. For example, "honor your parents" is a broad normative principle, but applying that principle may translate to a lifetime of distinctive actions. Applied ethics is inseparable from cultural and historical contexts because actual situations in which people apply ethics *only* occur in real-life contexts. The types of Old Testament laws called civil laws demonstrate this because they are highly contextual and were used in Israel to govern daily life. These civil laws are sometimes called case laws (Jones, 2013, pp. 57-59). The **case laws** were moral norms derived from moral law, applied to specific culturally and historically situated cases.

Many ethicists argue that these "case studies" show moral principles applied to daily life. For example, Paul explains that the normative principle in Deu. 25:4 was equitable reimbursement, in that case, applied to farm animals in recompense for their work. In 1 Cor 9:9-14, he argued that the same principle of equitable reimbursement may be applied to ministers of the gospel, who are allowed some material benefits for their spiritual work (Frame, 2008, p. 969). Isolating such moral norms and applying them can be hard work, but all the other genres in the Bible are an ethical playground to experiment with and learn from. These descriptive narratives *describe* a situation rather than declare *prescribed* action. Descriptive stories narrate actions, seldom pronouncing what is right, wrong, good, or bad (Feinberg, 2010, p. 23). Steffen and Bjoraker (2020) call this

sparseness of detail "narrative minimalism" (p. 203), and they explain that it leads to richer discussion and more memorable discovery of truth than if all the details were supplied in the first place (pp. 203-205).

These descriptive narratives come from the wide range of genres in Scripture that align, like myth, with other cultural **folklore genres**. These **folklore genres** may include humor genres, magic tales, fables, parables, trickster tales, poems, songs, legends, or epics. These stories and their counterparts in the Bible can explore humor, supernatural interactions, morals, decisions, and heroic acts to help listeners discuss and determine what is appropriate in each contextual situation. Against this rich narrative backdrop, Christians may explore the ethical nature of actions and decisions within specific contexts and compare the events of biblical lives to events of their own. Spiritual maturity happens in the context of relationships, and oral hermeneutics exercised in Bible genres like these give the opportunity for believers to build those relationships with each other and with the Bible's characters (Steffen & Bjoraker, 2020, p. 116). These characters "follow us like shadows through the contours of our lives" when we so deeply identify with their experiences that they train us how to live (Steffen & Neu, 2024, p. 165). Oral hermeneutics focuses on characters in these ways and helps believers to differentiate sin from righteousness, the ethical from the unethical examples, and above all, highlights God as the main character and our perfect example (Steffen & Bjoraker, 2020, pp. 173, 177, 215).

Many questions in the territory of applied ethics arise in response to these narratives, allowing listeners to consider whether courses of action were ethical, beneficial, right, wrong, or ought to be repeated. Was Nabal's decision to refuse David's request wise? Should women behave like Abigail when their husbands are irrational (1 Sm. 25)? Was David right to take the showbread for himself and his men? Did he obey or disobey any moral norms? What were the

consequences? Were they his fault (1 Sm. 21-22)? What can be learned from Moses and the Lord's response to Zelophehad's daughters about land, inheritance, property, and women's rights (Nm. 36)? Was Ruth's work ethic beneficial? Was Boaz' kindness necessary or simply good? Does Onan's death teach about masturbation, birth control, family obligation, or care for widows (Gn. 38)? These questions seldom find direct answers in the biblical narrative. However, they are a backdrop for discussions that lead us to learn and apply ethics in our own lives. These daily life narratives instruct by leading us to respond viscerally to real-life scenarios, a Bible full of them, and question our own ethical applications and assumptions. This play of daily life against the backdrop of meta-ethics and normative ethics is a highly instructive use of the Bible's folklore genres for ethical education.

How Oral Hermeneutics Makes it All Work

Together, these genres found in God's Word are perfectly suited to build a well-rounded Christian ethic because they express the raw material needed for meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Nevertheless, it is oral hermeneutics that actually *does the work* of forming this ethic in the minds, hearts, and actions of oral learners. Oral hermeneutics "is an experiential interpretation method to understand more fully the narrative genre in Scripture" (Steffen & Bjoraker, 2020, p. 128). Typically, the practice involves telling or performing a narrative from the Bible in a group and then taking time with God's word to allow people to interact with it deeply by discussing and experiencing the narrative for themselves. It tends to focus on characters in the narratives, and practitioners learn how to live through positive and negative examples as biblical truth is demonstrated rather than defined (pp. 16-18). This practice within oral hermeneutics is called character theology because it focuses on characters to "reveal theology and ethics through embodied demonstrations" and ultimately drives to discover the

character of God himself (Steffen & Neu, 2024, p. 30, 181).

These concrete experiential and relational emphases of oral hermeneutics are what make it such an effective tool for developing a more accessible study and practice of ethics. The experiences and demonstrations of ethics that oral hermeneutics provides give a concrete context for the highly abstract ideas of meta-ethics and normative ethics. As Steffen and Neu (2024) explain, oral hermeneutics

> assumes theology and ethics are communicated through demonstration rather than definition. Unlike the more didactic sections of Scripture where doctrinal truths and ethics tend to be more explicitly stated seemingly in their abstractness…, the narrative sections reveal such truths through illustrations and demonstrations lived out through concrete characters. (pp. 161-162)

For example, God's character is the basis for meta-ethics because God is the moral standard of goodness or righteousness. The relational emphasis of oral hermeneutics develops both a communal and personal relationship with God to give practitioners concrete context for divine character and meta-ethics as they learn who God is story by story. That communal relationship with God the group develops as they practice this hermeneutic is essential for deep ethical learning. Many benefit from—and oral learners *need*—a small group context with its relationships, accountability, discipleship, transparency, and family-like atmosphere (Willis, 2010, pp. 86-87) in order to flourish as they learn and practice ethics.

Rich dialogue springs out of this relational and concrete context that helps participants discover ethics from God's Word for themselves in such a way that the truth and practice are internalized and lasting. Questions about narrative details, characters, actions, potential motivations, and real-life settings all bring out key components of ethical evaluations. Moreover, the dialogue process

itself sifts for these truths while underscoring them with the emotional impact of experiencing the story through empathetic relationships with the characters. This nurtures curiosity and wonder that leads to lasting, impactful discoveries of God's truth and how to put it into practice (Steffen & Neu, 2024, p. 143). To ensure faithful hermeneutical practice, a skilled facilitator loosely guides the conversation using thoughtfully crafted questions designed to encourage discovery and learning. At times, the facilitator may pause the discussion to gently challenge the group to reflect on whether their assumptions align with biblical truth (pp. 141, 204).

Spiral Logic and Story Sets

Another distinction of oral hermeneutics that equips it to teach ethics well is its latitude for varied cultural logic pattern preferences. Oral hermeneutics is practiced through a series of stories called a story set, and to build a good one, a storyteller must discover what their people believe about reality at their core before selecting stories to effectively teach them (Willis, 2010, p. 148). For many cultures, those core worldview tenets include what is called cyclical or spiral logic. Scripture's own story sets include this logic pattern, for example, in Lk. 15, where Jesus tells three parables about a lost coin, a lost sheep, and a lost son; these stories spiral through the same themes repetitively to deepen the meaning and display it from different angles (Steffen & Neu, 2024, pp. 194-195, 197). Mburu (2019) confirms that this same logic pattern of repetitive communication or thinking is not only a preference but also a standard in African contexts. She explains that plot progression in African storytelling is not directly linear. In this "cyclical linear" format, the whole story is important, with all its features and repetitions, because all of them are needed to convey the meaning. Every repeated phrase or word, theme, or symbol emphatically gestures in its unique way toward the primary meaning in the narrative (pp. 151, 157).

While spiral logic can show up on a smaller scale in a repetitive conversation or the plot of a single story, it can also shape how people learn on a larger scale through an entire story set. In fact, spiral teaching is a unique strength to leverage for the study of ethics because it allows believers to cycle through each of the Bible's genres best suited to teach meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. This spiral construction of a story set allows oral learners to build a robust ethical code while at the same time developing its practice in their lives. The characteristic focus oral hermeneutics has on concrete application makes it a well-suited tool to foster this pairing of ethical study and praxis. So, if believers use various narrative genres in their studies, they are likely to learn ethics along the way, whether or not that was their primary intent. Moreover, if they intend to focus on a particular ethical topic in a short period, a few relevant passages can ensure a well-rounded spiral teaching course that presents God's wisdom on the topic to the group from several different angles; some mythic narratives can ground a healthy meta-ethic, some prescriptive narratives, law, or wisdom passages can build the frame of normative ethics, and some descriptive narratives can fill in the framework and provide the backdrop for believers to live out applied ethics in their lives.

Returning, then, to the Americans discussed at the beginning as an example, a starting point would be to look for expressions of the group's current ethical beliefs and practices. The current Vice President voiced a pseudo-Christian ethical principle many agreed with when he said it is the proper order first to love family, then neighbor, community, fellow citizens, and *then* foreigners (Dias, 2025). This statement could diagnose the breach of biblical ethics as a failure to understand God's love and how he intends his followers to reflect that love unconditionally to foreigners, or perhaps in understanding God's special care for disadvantaged people and identification with them. A spiral ethical teaching for this

case, then, would first include some weighty mythic genre entries to teach God's character as the meta-ethics standard: the first exile from the Garden of Eden, the Israelite Exodus from Egypt, God's continued love for his imperfect exiled people as presented in Hosea and the exilic prophets, Jesus's own reenactment of exile in Egypt as an infant, Pentecost, or Revelation's throne room when God builds his kingdom with people from different lands and languages.

The normative ethics dimension of the spiral teaching would then include entries from prescriptive narrative, law, or wisdom genres to teach unchanging moral principles: Deuteronomy or Leviticus laws that protect and provide for foreigners, circumcision or Passover instructions that allow foreigners to participate, Psalms or Isaiah's poetry in which God calls all nations together to worship, Jesus' Beatitude elevation of those humble in heart and circumstances, Jesus' explanation of the law with the prescriptive good Samaritan parable, Peter's welcome of Cornelius after the prescriptive rooftop vision about what or who is unclean, and Hebrews' closing injunctions to show hospitality to strangers and mistreated people on the heels of listing heroes of faith who lived as foreigners themselves. Finally, descriptive narrative genre case studies allow participants to explore how to apply those ethical foundations and norms in their circumstances: Israel's relationship with the Gibeonites in the times of Joshua up to Kings David and Saul, the story of Ruth that contrasts the virtue of a foreigner to the character of the Israelite family she married into, Jonah and the Assyrians, Esther and Haman, the foreign woman who asked Jesus to help her daughter, Jesus' criteria for separating sheep and goats, and Paul's reception when he traveled to foreign lands.

As with any ethical topic a group chooses to spiral through, the dialogue time after each story will feature questions that emphasize character or ethical decisions for applied ethics, moral principles for normative ethics, and God's character for meta-ethics.

In the case of this sample ethical topic, questions would focus on understanding God's love, his care for vulnerable people, God's expectations for his followers in their interactions with such people, the experiences of people living as foreigners, the experiences of people who interact with foreigners, and how those experiences do or do not bear out a scriptural ethic.

Conclusion

With a story set like that, the study of ethics is incredibly approachable for oral hermeneutics practitioners, no matter how inaccessible the formal academic discipline of ethics may be to them. This application of oral hermeneutics to teach ethics is at home helping war-torn Sudanese discover what Scripture has to say to them about the widespread practice of husbands living apart from their families. Furthermore, it is equally at home helping rural Americans discover how God's word should shape their political decisions and relationships with refugees and immigrants. These teaching methods apply to digital oral learners in urban settings just as easily as they do to tribal oral learners in rural settings across the world. Teaching an oral ethic taps into the embodied, relational, oral part of our natures that reflect the image of God no matter our education level or cultural background.

This article has just been a sample of how oral hermeneutics can serve believers by providing them both an accessible, rigorous study of ethics and the opportunity to embody those ethics in their own lives as they discuss and apply them. The genres God chose to communicate his word uniquely speak into the branches of ethics, and hermeneutics is the key to lifting that raw ethical material off of the pages of Scripture and putting it into minds and hearts. Oral hermeneutics is a style of hermeneutics uniquely

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suited to this task because it focuses not just on ethical knowledge but on developing ethical character, and it does this in such a way that anyone can fruitfully participate no matter their learning style or educational background.

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Book Review

Exegeting Orality: Interpreting the Inspired Words of Scripture in Light of Their Oral Traditional Origins

Janet Stahl

Abstract: Nick Acker, an OT scholar, explores new discoveries in oral traditions and identifies several commonly used rhetorical features, such as repetition of themes, catchwords, patterns, and activation. He then demonstrates the recognition of these features in a text to help in the interpretation of portions of Judges, Habbakuk, the synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John, and portions of Paul's epistle to the Romans.

Section one: Chapters 1-4

"Context of Orality, Defining Orality, Summation of Oral Traditions, and Oral Traditions and Written Texts"

In the first of two sections of the book, Acker makes a compelling argument that long past the advent of creating written forms of the Scriptures, the oral traditions of the Israelite people continued to influence the mindset and performance of the Scriptures. Once the scribes began writing down the stories, prayer, poems, and other Scriptures, the text was used by tradents and tellers as reminders. The majority of people interacted with the Scriptures being performed. The role of the trident was to perform the Scriptures and remain faithful to the traditions within the context of their time. Acker presents a brief history of the text-saturated Western approaches to studying the word and contrasts them with recent research in the area of oral traditions of communication. He states his purpose for writing this book is to show how applying new discoveries in rhetorical devices common among oral traditions can influence, if not improve, our interpretation of the Scriptures.

Several notable features of oral traditions that Acker gathers are:

- Human communication is more than words, and writing down what originally was an oral performance, as much as the Bible would have been, reduces dynamic, complex communication into linear print.
- Tradents or storytellers perform not so much to offer content but more to remind the audience or community of what they already know, and they do so in creative ways for a specific context. Their experiential collective memory is ingrained in the identity of the community and influences the psyche more so than memory being rote or mental activity.
- "The concept of fluidity and stability, in which oral traditions more often operate, expects fluidity in the presentation of the tradition, though with an overall trend of stability due to the communal preservation of the received tradition" (p. 6).
- Acker refers to William Schneider's definition:

Oral tradition is characterized by three qualities: (1) It is shared orally among people who, to varying degrees, hold common understandings of their histories and cultures. (Some people share multiple histories and cultures.) (2) The knowledge that comes from oral tradition is learned and subject to common and yet ever-evolving understandings of what constitutes performance and its contents. (Included here is the consideration of how stories are told, the roles of storytellers and audiences, the purposes and settings for telling, and the use of symbols and metaphors to convey what people want to be understood.) (3) Oral traditions are told over time in recognizably similar ways but with variations of detail and emphasis subject to the circumstances of each performance and the liberties taken by the speakers. (p. 8)

- Acker uses the term "activation" to describe the use of a theme, a word/phrase, a symbol, a name, or a scene by a performer to intentionally call to the audiences' minds a shared story or a larger oral tradition. This activation shapes the interpretation of the performance.
- Acker notes that recognizable patterns or genres of communication are another important oral feature for interpreting written texts of oral performances.

- Repetition and formulaic speech are common rhetorical features in oral traditions.

In chapter 3, Acker uses his study of multiple early manuscripts of Habakkuk to show the oral nature of this book of the Bible. He highlights *a ring composition* for the five woes in Hab. 2 and the intentional use of "*activation*" *words/phrases, themes, and scenes* that would have been recognizable to the community listening to the performers of Habakkuk and would influence their interpretation of any performance. He is careful to acknowledge that a literary or text-based study of the book may lead to a similar interpretation of Habakkuk, and he suggests that the recognition and exploration of these oral features can greatly assist in interpreting the text.
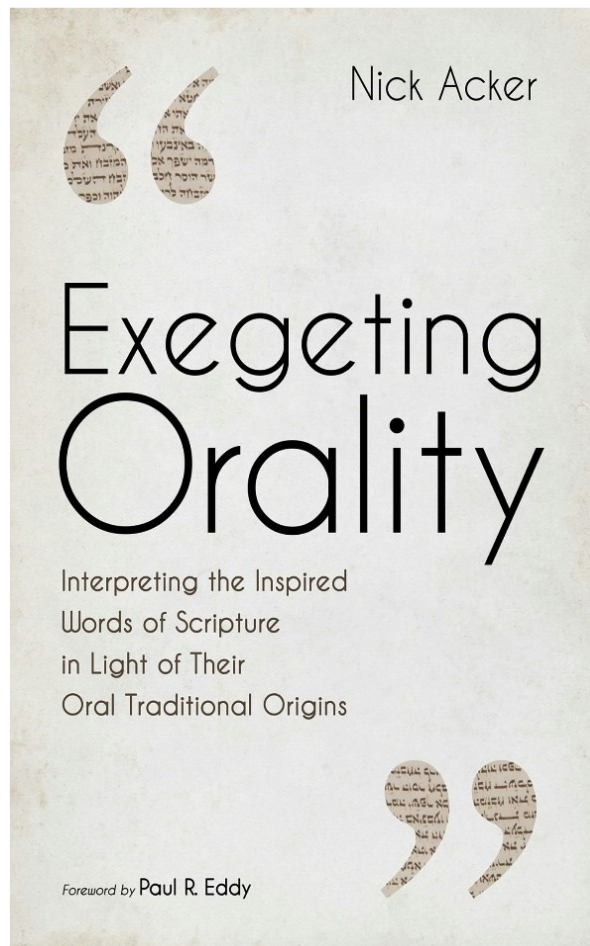
Section Two – Chapters 5-10 and Final Words

Having laid the foundation for recognizing oral features in the Scriptures and using them to help interpret Habakkuk, Acker devotes the second section to illustrating the processes of recognition of oral features and using them to help interpret portions of the Old and New Testament.

Oral exegesis of Judges

In the chapter on the book of *Judges*, Acker highlights the pattern of minor judges followed by several major judges repeated

three times. In each repetition, the apostasy of the people increases, making the merciful involvement of God increasingly more remarkable. Within each cycle or section of minor and major judges, Acker notes significant repetition of catchphrases, scenes, and themes as well as contrasts that would have activated the audiences' minds of the downward spiral into apostasy. He highlights the interplay with other portions of Scripture that the Israelite audiences would have been familiar with and would have been influenced by the impact of the stories on their lives.

Oral exegesis of Synoptic Gospels

Acker illustrates the validity of the combined *fluidity and stability of the Gospel story* by showing the harmony of theme and pattern in the synoptic Gospels while highlighting the uniqueness of each author's performance/writing. Each Gospel author includes Jesus' three predictions of his impending death and resurrection. However, each author has varied the placement of the occurrences in the narrative arc to highlight different aspects of faith. He describes the repetitive patterns in all three Gospels and the repeated themes of authority, response to Jesus, and mission. The Gospel of Mark is full of significant repetition of themes and catchwords. The Gospel of Matthew includes an *echo-ring construction*. The Gospel of Luke focuses on the theme of the humble being lifted, echoing the imagery of the snake being lifted on the staff in the wilderness and Jesus being lifted on the cross.

Oral exegesis of John's Gospel

The author identifies a number of *framing repetitions* in the Gospel of John: the mention of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the first miracle and during the crucifixion and the inclusion of Nicodemus at the beginning and again at Jesus' burial. He highlights *activation words and themes of births, marriages and baptisms, water, wine, and blood*. He suggests that John wanted his audience to shift their attention from the Kingdom of God on earth and in heaven, as the three other Gospel writers focused on, to a *new family of God on earth and in heaven*.

Oral exegesis of Paul's Letter to the Romans

In the chapter on Romans, Acker focuses on Romans chapters 9-11, in particular, the controversial topics of predestination and the relationship between Israel and the church. He argues that a study of the *typology of God* or the pattern of God's working in all of Scripture should help us interpret this portion of Scriptures without falling into the temptation of thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought (Ro. 11: 25-26). He suggests that this is a mindset more than a method. "God is working in his pattern: (1) His rejection of one people (2) establishes a group of people who (3) operate as the mode of salvation for all" (p. 206).

Acker uses the rest of the chapter to highlight *activating words and phrases* from Old Testament quotes to help illuminate this pattern of God. For example, he notes the line of Ishmael is not rejected so much as by-passed for the line of Isaac to be the group through whom God brings about salvation for all. The author suggests that the "election of people" or the choosing of people can happen through adoption, which calls to mind the list of people adopted into Jesus' lineage, such as Zipporah, Rehab, and Ruth. Moreover, he draws attention to Paul's use of Moses' words to talk about God's sovereignty and faithfulness to remind the Roman listeners of this pattern of God.

Conclusion

In his final chapter, Acker presents an argument for the performance of Scripture and addresses the new discipline of Bible Performance Criticism. He warns that the performance of the Scriptures should be done with careful research and study of the passage to be performed and the context in which the authors placed them. Acker concludes that recognizing and experiencing the rhetorical features in the text can help performers and their audiences interpret the Scriptures

more accurately. This is especially true for those whose oral traditions still shape their thinking and communication.

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