Textuality and the Bible

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Each new generation of the people of God must grapple with the reality that God has revealed himself in a book. It must ask what the significance of that reality is for the life of faith. History shows that renewed interest in the reading and interpretation of the text of Scripture has punctuated all the major periods in the community of believers. At the end of Moses' life he explained the Torah to the people (Deut 1:5). He also wrote the Torah and gave instructions to read the Torah publicly on a regular basis after his death (Deut 31:9–13). The impetus and basis for Josiah's religious reforms was the discovery of the "book" (sefer) of the Torah and the subsequent public reading of it (2 Kgs 22–23). Reestablishment of the post-exilic community took place under the leadership of Ezra (Ezra 7:6, 10) who read and expounded the book of the Torah in accordance with Moses' original instructions (Neh 8–9). The NT authors repeatedly acknowledged the critical role

1. "... the biblical texts must be investigated for their own sake to the extent that the revelation which they attest does not stand or occur, and is not to be sought, behind or above them but in them. If in reply it is asked whether Christianity is really a book-religion, the answer is that strangely enough Christianity has always been and only been a living religion when it is not ashamed to be actually and seriously a book-religion" (Barth, Church Dogmatics, 494–95).


3. The Hebrew term sefer does not refer in this context to a "book" in the sense of a codex or a bound document. The translation "book" is appropriate where sefer refers to a large literary work as opposed to a smaller document such as a letter. See Schniedewind, How the Bible Became a Book, 4.
of the Hebrew Scriptures in their understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (e.g., Luke 24:25–27, 44–47; John 1:45; 5:46; Rom 1:2; 3:21–22; 16:25–26; 2 Tim 3:15–16). The Protestant Reformation had its beginnings in a return prompted by the Renaissance to the written sources (ad fontes) of the faith. Martin Luther’s German translation of the Bible and John Calvin’s commentaries were the pillars of that era.

Of course, large swaths of that same history were plagued by long droughts (Isa 29:9–12; Amos 8:11–14; Dan 12:4). The defining moments mentioned above were offset by movements that deemphasized the Bible either in theory or in practice. Biblical illiteracy in modern churches is well documented, and the decline of biblical language courses in the education of leaders is not helping the situation. Even those who favor in principle an expository approach to teaching the Bible often appear to have little idea of what is involved in the execution of such an approach. That the Bible is a text (or a text made of texts) is not news to anyone, but in actual practice the object of study in what usually passes for biblical interpretation is often far from clear. So-called introductions to the Bible typically spend more time introducing the ancient world of the Bible than they do introducing the literature itself. Sermons are at best reenactments of biblical events, attempts to isolate life principles, or proof-texting in the service of orthodox dogma. At worst they are exercises in pop psychology/philosophy and motivational speaking. Theologies of the Bible frequently bypass the form and sequence of the Bible in favor of some other arrangement. It is not difficult to trace the correlation between this virtual

4. “Through the rediscovery of the writings of antiquity and their wide distribution enabled by printing, the humanists awakened to life a cultural heritage that had been largely buried for a long time. . . . This occurred, on the one hand, by philological work; critical editions of sources called for the text-critical method in particular. It also became the prerequisite for biblical exegesis; the work of Erasmus on the New Testament is an important proof of this. Knowledge of biblical languages—now also increasingly Hebrew—was recognized as a decisive prerequisite for it” (Reventlow, History of Biblical Interpretation, 1).

5. Rendtorff’s theology is a welcome exception to this general trend (The Canonical Hebrew Bible).
absence of the Bible and the fractured foundations of biblical faith. The voice of Christianity has been reduced to a series of disparate sound bites lacking the biblical context needed to bolster and define its message.

The present volume is devoted to the Bible's textuality, the unique combination of literary genres that constitute the focus of both private and public faith and without which the people of God cannot continue to exist in any sort of recognizable way. The Bible has a pre-history and in some cases an oral pre-history, but the Bible as it now stands is a literary phenomenon. Likewise, while the Bible is both historical and theological, it is not strictly speaking history or theology. It is literature. It is thus necessary to describe it in textual, literary, and even in linguistic terms. The biblical authors are remarkably self-aware of writing. As compared to Homer's the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which refer to writing only once (in the *Iliad*), the Bible has 429 references to writing or written documents. The biblical authors are also conscious of one another and are not shy about their mutual admiration and dependence. They wholeheartedly commend the textual nature of revelation to their readers. It is this very textuality that requires the church to be a people of the book, nothing more and nothing less.

6. Strictly speaking this is metadiscourse about the nature of the Bible, yet the distinctive shape of the canon drives the discussion. This kind of conscious reflection is necessary to maintain an awareness of what is so easily lost to those things that are on the periphery of the Bible.

Orality and Textuality

The relationship between the text(s) of the Bible and any possible oral traditions behind them has long been of interest to biblical scholars. More recently, oral performance of texts has captured the attention of those seeking to explain the Bible in something other than strictly textual categories. In addition to these issues is the matter of the dynamic quality of orality over against the potentially static textualization of that orality. This chapter is not intended to deny oral tradition/performance or the value of orality in general. Rather, it is an attempt to avoid the confusion of orality and textuality. Related to this discussion will be the treatment of other non-textual phenomena that frequently obscure the textuality of the Bible in interpretation. Of course, the goal is to give the Bible’s textuality its proper place, but this will not be at the expense of other legitimate pursuits.

1. "If one is able to trace a text’s origin and, if necessary, its formative changes back into the realm of oral tradition, then transmission history prepares indispensable insights for understanding this text. One can detect locality, time, rationale, and the arena of usage concerning the origin and the changes. Together with the transmission form’s characteristic components these insights leave traces in oral tradition up to the oldest literary version of the text. Also, on the basis of this prehistory, these insights make the text understandable" (Steck, Old Testament Exegesis, 71). Steck’s confidence in the assumed self-evident reliability of the process and methodology is apparent.

2. See, for example, the papers presented in the “Orality and Textuality” section of the recent annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature.
Oral Tradition

The Bible itself bears witness to the oral performance of stories, laws, prophecies, poems, and songs prior to their written form and prior to the inclusion of their written form within the larger composition of the biblical texts. The text of Judg 5:11 mentions the recounting of the righteous acts of YHWH, which now has a textual reference in the narratives of the Pentateuch (cf. 1 Sam 12:7). The laws at Sinai were delivered orally (Exod 20:1, 19; Deut 5:4–5) and only later were committed to writing (Exod 24:4, 12; 31:18; Deut 5:22). The sermons of the prophets (e.g., Jer 7) have been collected and textualized and thereby have been re-contextualized so that messages for past generations can now be messages for future generations. As for the psalms, Hermann Gunkel attempted to reconstruct from their written forms the “setting in life” (Sitz im Leben) in which their content might have been uttered. The sayings of the book of Proverbs also likely stem from larger oral and written traditions (1 Kgs 5:9–14 [Eng., 4:29–34]).

But the assumption that this pre-history somehow explains the intended meaning of the currently extant literature is not necessarily a warranted one. Apart from the general uncertainty surrounding reconstruction of tradition and apart from a basic inability to access directly the oral performance of earlier traditions, there are issues that should prevent the interpreter from making too facile a correlation between orality and textuality even when confidence in the reconstruction is high. For example, the Sinai...

3. Thus, the goal in interpretation of the prophetic books is not the sermon itself, as if the texts were mere transcripts, or even the prophet himself. “There is no ‘real Amos’ other than the one brokered by the text’s discursive unfolding” (Seitz, Prophecy and Hermeneutics, 230). Likewise, there is no historical Jesus apart from the biblical Jesus. This is not to say that the one is at odds with the other. Rather, the biblical Jesus is a unique and revelatory theological interpretation of the life of Christ. Any attempt to reconstruct him independently either replaces or obscures the biblical portrait of him.


5. See, in particular, the relationship between the sayings of the wise (Prov 22:17—24:22; 24:23–34) and the Egyptian instruction of Amenemopet (Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 421–25).
law is now not only in written form, but also it is set within a larger
narrative and compositional framework that provides its own con­
text for interpretation. Likewise, while individual psalms may have
had a life of their own in either oral or written form, they are now
part of the book of Psalms where their relationship to other writ­
ten psalms exerts an influence on how they are to be read. Even
the rehearsals of biblical history (e.g., Deut 26:5–9; Josh 24:1–15;
Ezek 20; Pss 78; 105; 106; 136; Neh 9), which are generally taken
to be manifestations of variant oral and written traditions about
Israel's history, are now presented to the reader as examples of
textual exegesis.6 Furthermore, appeals to extra-biblical tradition
to explain texts like Hosea 12, which refers to the Jacob story, ap­
pear dubious and unnecessary compared to the abundant and firm
textual evidence of Genesis.7 Oral performance of texts prior to
their inclusion within the composition of a biblical book would
also belong to the pre-history of that book. On the other hand, oral
performance of biblical books or portions thereof would belong to
the subsequent history of reading and interpretation. Information
about such performance could conceivably provide insight into
the way the texts were copied, transmitted, and received. But it
does not belong to the stage of biblical composition, which is a
purely textual enterprise. Explanation of oral performance does
not at the same time constitute explanation of the texts performed.

Writing in antiquity was special in part because the number
of those who could produce and read substantial literary works
was limited compared to the modern world (Isa 29:11–12).8 Writ-

7. Shepherd, Text in the Middle. David Carr has recently argued for oral-
written transmission of texts on the basis of perceived memory variants and on
the basis of evidence for memorization of large portions of texts (Formation of
the Hebrew Bible, 13–36). Apart from the possibility of other explanations such
as textual interpretation and what might appear to be equally pristine readings
(see Talmom, Text and Canon, 171–216; Tov, Textual Criticism, 163–65), the
reality of a scribe alternating between a written source and his own memory is
not always easy to conceptualize unless multiple sources are being referenced
(e.g., the Temple Scroll).
8. "Reading and writing were restricted to a professional elite; the major-
ity of the population was nonliterate" (Toorn, Scribal Culture, 1). "Sometimes
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ing was not only a way to preserve words (e.g., Isa 8:16; Dan 8:26; 12:4; Rev 22:10) but also a way to lend authority and power to words. Thus, for example, Job’s desire to have his words written (Job 19:23–24) might be more than a wish for the preservation of his argument for posterity. It may very well be a longing for an authoritative status that would strengthen his case for vindication.

On the other hand, there has always been resistance to writing at least in some circles and in particular circumstances. Those who are not members of the elite, literate class do not always find their voice represented in writing. Furthermore, some words are better spoken than written. The living voice of the teacher is in many ways just as valuable as the text. William Schniedewind has suggested that the reference to the “false pen of the scribes” in Jer 8:8 is an example of such an objection to textualization, although it is possible that the verse is a reference to tampering with actual texts, tampering evident even in the transmission of the book of Jeremiah when the MT and the LXX (cf. 4QJer⁴, ⁵) are compared.

Schniedewind also cites the critique of writing in the complaint of Plato’s Socrates to Phaedrus: “Written words seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them

scholars will refer to the number of times ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and assume that this demonstrates that elites and non-elites could read and write. However, I would contend that the Hebrew Bible was primarily a corpus written by elites to elites” (Rollston, Writing and Literacy, 133). “A number of scholars have argued that the biblical canon and its texts are rather more of a scribal creation than previously allowed. These scribes are also seen as an elite class, and inventive producers rather than transcribers of ideology” (Davies and Römer, Writing the Bible, 4).


10. “Writing locates authority in a text and its reader instead of in a tradition and a community. Writing does not require the living voice. Thus, writing has the power to supplant traditional modes of teaching and social structures of education. In a pre-literate society authority was entirely dependent upon traditions held by parents and elders and passed down orally from generation to generation. The community held the keys to wisdom and authority. Written texts had the possibility of replacing traditional community-centered wisdom. One no longer had to depend on the community for knowledge and wisdom because the written word itself could confer knowledge” (ibid., 114).

11. Ibid., 115.
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anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place" (Phaedrus §275d).12 This quote highlights one of the key differences between orality and textuality.13 The author of a text is not present to explain what he/she has written every time the text is read. A teacher, on the other hand, is present with the students and is available to interact with them over the content of the teaching. But what this means is that the author must put his text together with such considerations in mind, anticipating questions and objections from readers. Perhaps the real objection in the above citation is to the recording of teaching intended for a particular audience at a certain time. This would be comparable to the audio recording of a modern lecture. The lecture is really directed to the students who are in the moment and who share the context of the rest of the course. To isolate that lecture for someone who was not present would be to decontextualize the content. It is very difficult to freeze such a moment and make it transferable to other settings without significant loss. A consciously constructed literary work, however, is ideally prepared to be read by anyone. As for the unchangeable nature of such a literary work, it likely depends upon the quality of the content and the perspective of the reader as to whether or not its immutability is a positive or a negative.

Text and Reference

What about other non-textual phenomena behind the text of the Bible such as the many objects (people, places, things, and events), concepts, and ideas to which the Bible refers? Scholars often claim without argumentation that an independent account of such things helps the interpreter to understand the text. In actual fact,

12. Ibid., 14.
13. This is not to mention the many other differences such as the gestures, facial expressions, and intonation associated with spoken language that cannot be reproduced in written form.
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the reason why these same scholars fail to connect the dots of this claim is that their independent accounts do not explain the meaning of the text at all. What their reconstructions do contribute, however, is an explanation of the things to which the Bible refers beyond what the Bible itself says. 14 This simply requires an understanding of the way in which language works and its relationship to reality.

Hans Frei’s monumental work, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, keenly identifies the emergence of preoccupation with the historicity of the Bible in the post-Reformation period. This historicity of the Bible or the lack thereof became separable from the Bible itself so that the Bible’s own account was either questioned or defended on the grounds of independent historical reconstructions. These reconstructions then took the place of explication of biblical narrative. For skeptics, an account of “what really happened” sufficed as an explanation of the biblical text. Conservatives conceded this playing ground and responded not with the unique contribution of the biblical narrative itself but with an elaborate defense of the Bible’s historicity largely on the basis of extra-biblical information. Once this defense was complete, the Bible had been “explained.” The Bible’s textual representation of reality was rendered irrelevant. 15 It is not difficult to find manifestations of this eclipse in virtually every form of biblical interpretation today. 16

14. James Barr makes this point well in a discussion of Leviathan in the book of Job: “The primary need of the exegete is not to ‘identify’ the mythological background, in the sense of stating exactly what pre-existing myth is presupposed; what is more important is the myth as it is reconstructed by the poet for his own purposes.... The pre-Israelite background is interesting information, but is not more than ancillary to the explanation of the passage” (Comparative Philology, 382–83).

15. Criticism of this approach has somehow resulted in accusations of the denial of the historical events. But this need not necessarily follow. It is at its core a clarification of the object of study.

16. A classic example of the lasting effect of the eclipse is the following statement from a widely used conservative introduction to the Old Testament: “... the exodus was God’s greatest act of salvation in the Old Testament” (Longman and Dillard, Introduction to the OT, 72–73). This confusion between the
Largely due to the influence of modern linguistics, biblical scholars have come to recognize the referential fallacy in word studies, as the following quote from James Barr so amply illustrates:

Students may find it helpful to use the distinction between reference and information. By 'reference' I mean that to which a word refers, the actual thought or entity which is its referent. By 'information' I mean the difference which is conveyed, within a known and recognized sign system (a language like Hebrew or Arabic), by the fact that it is this sign and not another that is used. The major linguistic interest, it would seem to me, lies in the latter. Many arguments in which biblical scholars adduce linguistic evidence appear to me, however, to involve some confusion between the former and the latter.17

Barr uses the example of an attempt to define the word *maqom* ("place") as "tomb" simply on the grounds that in some passages it refers to a tomb. But words are not defined by the things to which they refer. Rather, things are described by words.

The relationship between "words" (*verba*) and "things" (*res*) is an arbitrary one.18 Words are defined on the basis of their usage within the language and on the basis of their relationship to other words within the same semantic field.19 Thus, an independent history of ancient Israel and the text of the Hebrew Scriptures is all too common and results in a loss of meaning and significance. It can certainly be said that the original exodus from Egypt was God's greatest act of salvation in the history of ancient Israel, but the greatest act of salvation revealed in the text of the Hebrew Bible is the new exodus (e.g., Num 23:22; 24:8; Isa 11:16; 43:16–21; Hos 2:16–17 [Eng., 2:14–15]; Mic 7:15). The same can be said of the overly simplistic identification of the Hebrew Bible with the law, the old covenant, or Judaism, resulting in a fundamental inability to see any genuine continuity with the New Testament documents.


18. See Ernesti, *Institutio interprets Novi Testamenti*, 8; Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 67–69. Ernesti argued that this relationship excluded any attempt to explain words from the things to which they refer. He insisted that it should be the other way around. Words acquire meaning by custom.

19. See Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*. Barr's approach has been adopted in *TLOT*: "TLOT has consciously not been planned as a reference work for comparative religion or archaeology, because the latter would shift
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description of Rebekah (the referent) in Genesis 24 does not explain the meaning of the terms *naarah* ("a young female"), *bethu­lah* ("a young woman who has not conceived"), and *almah* ("a young woman of marriageable age who does not have a husband") that refer to Rebekah, nor does it explain their relationship to one another or why the author would choose one or the other. Now the challenge is to have scholars recognize the referential fallacy not only with individual words but also with phrases, clauses, and whole texts.

Perhaps more than any else, John Sailhamer has drawn attention to the importance of making this distinction, especially with regard to the importance of the text as the locus of revelation in evangelical doctrine (2 Tim 3:16). Sailhamer fully affirms the historicity of the events referenced in the Bible and the significance of those real events for Christian faith (1 Cor 15:14), but he is also concerned to allow the unique textual depiction of the events maintain its voice lest the interpreter's contributions from outside the text obscure the specific theological rendering intended by the authors. Sailhamer uses the illustration of a Rembrandt painting to make his point:

Using modern historical tools, we have the same ability to fill in the historical details of seventeenth-century life over the shadows of a Rembrandt painting. By painting shadows, Rembrandt deliberately left out many historical details that would have given us much information about the events he recorded on canvas. Historians who understand the culture and life setting of seventeenth-century Europe could easily replace Rembrandt's dark shadows with historically accurate details of the world around him . . . We should not seek to know what lies behind or beneath Rembrandt's shadows. It is the shadows that are a central part of the paintings, not the historical details that lie behind the shadows and are thus not in the

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the major emphasis (similar to that of a theological dictionary) too heavily from the semantic function of words to the description of the referent and its history" (Jenni and Westermann, *TLOT*, xv).

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painting. Rembrandt’s meaning lies as much in what is not seen in his painting as in what is seen. The shadows, by blocking out the irrelevant details, help us focus on what is seen. The effect of our adding more details to the painting would be to lose Rembrandt’s focus.21

If forced to make a choice, would it be preferable to be present at an event like the exodus or the crucifixion, or would it be preferable to have the biblical depiction and interpretation of those events? Many would jump at the opportunity to be present at the events themselves, not realizing that the events are not self-interpreting even though they are inherently meaningful. Thus, someone present at the exodus would certainly have a sense of the power of God, but would that person know about the new exodus? Someone present at the crucifixion would know that Jesus died, but would that person know that Jesus died for the sins of the world? Only the Bible provides that information.22

21. Sailhamer, Meaning of the Pentateuch, 104. For Sailhamer, following Ernesti, the “historical” sense is the “grammatical” sense (ibid., 100–148).

22. For further reading, see Schmidt, Contextualizing Israel’s Sacred Writings.