

## THE ANCIENT ISRAELITE SCRIBE AS PERFORMER

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In her recent monograph *Oral World and Written Word*, Susan Niditch concludes that “Israelite writing is set in an oral context.”<sup>1</sup> From our modern, literate perspective, this conclusion may sound contradictory—that is, how can writing be understood in an oral context? In fact, until recently scholars of orality and literacy emphasized what Werner Kelber has called “the great divide thesis”<sup>2</sup>—that is, a tremendous gulf was envisioned between oral cultures and literate cultures. It was as if, when an oral epic was written down, it was completely removed from its traditional culture, never to be again influenced by that culture, and even the earliest readers of this new text were ignorant of its traditional culture. However, recent studies discuss an oral-literate continuum, thereby narrowing the supposed gap between oral and literate cultures especially as it relates to the interaction of orality and literacy in transitional cultures such as ancient Greece and medieval Europe.<sup>3</sup> Even though Niditch’s conclusion *seems* contradictory from our modern perspective on literacy, it is consistent with contemporary understandings of the interaction of literacy and orality in ancient and transitional cultures. Therefore, as Niditch states, “Israelite liter-

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996) 88.

<sup>2</sup> Werner Kelber, “Scripture and Logos: The Hermeneutics of Communication,” paper presented at SBL Annual Meeting, Kansas City, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); idem, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); R. Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Records in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

acy in form and function is not to be confused with modern literacy and ancient Israelite literacy has to be understood in the context of an oral-traditional culture”<sup>4</sup>

Niditch’s conclusions have implications for how the composition and transmission of the Hebrew Bible is understood. Niditch offers four models for the “genesis of the Hebrew Bible”

(1) the oral performance, which is dictated to a writer who preserves the text in an archive, creating a fixed text out of an event (2) the slow crystallization of a pan-Hebraic literary tradition through many performances over centuries of increasingly pan-Israelite tales to audiences with certain expectations and assumptions about shared group identity, late in the process authors write down the shared stories (3) a written imitation of oral-style literature to create portions of the tradition (4) the production of a written text that is excerpted from another written text by a writer who deftly edits or recasts the text in accordance with his own view of Israelite identity<sup>5</sup>

Although each of these models moves from one end of the oral-literate continuum to the other, Niditch capably demonstrates that even the most literate of these models—that is, a written composition based on written sources—is nevertheless influenced by an oral mind-set. For example, Chronicles is based on Samuel–Kings but does not displace or replace it as would be expected in a culture with a literate mind-set<sup>6</sup>

Niditch’s emphasis is clearly on the composition of the Hebrew Bible. However, after referring to some recent text-critical works, she suggests that “[t]he transmission of this tradition may well have involved complex interplays between written and oral processes”<sup>7</sup>. This essay is an effort to develop Niditch’s suggestion more fully. The contention of this paper is as follows: The ancient Israelite scribes were literate members of a primarily oral society. As members of a primarily oral society, they undertook even their literate activity—that is, the copying of texts—with an oral mind-set. When they copied their texts, the ancient Israelite scribes did not slavishly write the texts word by word, but preserved the texts’ meaning for the ongoing life of their communities in much the same way that performers of oral epic re-present the stable, yet dynamic, tradition to their communities. In this sense, the ancient Israelite scribes were not mere copyists but were also performers<sup>8</sup>. This contention is

<sup>4</sup> Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word* 99.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 130.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>8</sup> This position is similar to the arguments by A. N. Doane and Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe concerning Anglo-Saxon scribes. See A. N. Doane, “The Ethnography of Scribal Writing and Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Scribe as Performer,” *Oral Tradition* 9 (1994): 420–39; and K. O’Keefe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

defended below, drawing from the text-critical study of the Hebrew Bible and the study of oral traditions.<sup>9</sup>

### I. Oral Tradition and the Understanding of “Word”

As Niditch argues so well, ancient Israelite literature must be understood from the perspective of the aesthetics of an oral tradition. One aspect of oral traditions concerns the understanding of the basic unit of meaning. Studies in oral traditions of various cultures demonstrate that the understanding of “word” differs from our own highly literate understanding—that is, a unit of meaning in a primarily oral culture may be equivalent to what we would call a line, a stanza, or even the entire epic.<sup>10</sup> This general observation is illustrated well in the interview between Milman Parry’s Yugoslavian assistant Nikola Vujnovic and the Serbo-Croatian oral poet (*guslar*) Mujo Kukuruzovic:

- Nikola: Let’s consider this: “Vino pije licki Mustajbeze” (“Mustajbeg of Lika was drinking wine”). Is this a single word?
- Mujo: Yes.
- N: But how? It can’t be *one*: “Vino pije licki Mustajbeze.”
- M: In writing it can’t be one.
- N: There are four words here.
- M: It can’t be one in writing. But here, let’s say we’re at my house and I pick up the *gusle* [a traditional single-stringed instrument]—“Pije vino licki Mustajbeze”—that’s a single word on the *gusle* for me.
- N: And the second word?
- M: And the second word—“Na Ribniku u pjanjoj mehani” (“At Ribnik in a drinking tavern”)—there.<sup>11</sup>

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The position that ancient Israelite scribes were not mere copyists has recently been made by a variety of scholars. For example, see M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 78–79, 83–88, and many of the essays in J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue, eds., *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> The study of oral traditions is based on the foundational works of Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and Walter Ong. For an excellent introduction to the field of study, see J. M. Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Foley’s own contributions are highly recommended: *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and *The Singer in Tales in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

Niditch’s *Oral World and Written Word* is clearly the best application of the observations of oral tradition to the Hebrew Bible. For an excellent review of earlier studies, see R. Culley, “Oral Tradition and Biblical Studies,” *Oral Tradition* 1 (1986) 30–65.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Foley, “Editing Oral Epic Texts: Theory and Practice,” *Text* 1 (1981) 77–78; idem, *Traditional Oral Epic*, chaps. 4–6.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Foley, “Editing Oral Epic Texts,” 92 n. 11.

In this interview, we can see a clash of cultures as the literate Yugoslav insists that "Vino pije licki Mustajbeze" is not one word but four, while the oral poet insists that it is only one word. In fact, the oral poet's conception of the entire phrase being one word even allows for some variation. Notice that Nikola is discussing the phrase "Vino pije licki Mustajbeze," but when Mujo imagines playing his *gusle* and singing this phrase, he says what from a highly literate viewpoint might be considered a different phrase because of the inversion of the first two "words," that is, "Pije vino licki Mustajbeze." For Mujo, the oral poet, both "Vino pije licki Mustajbeze" and "Pije vino licki Mustajbeze" are not only one "word" but the *same* "word."

We can see a similar phenomenon in the semantic range of the Hebrew word דבר. דבר is the closest Hebrew equivalent to the English term "word," but it can also mean "utterance," "speech," or "message." For example, in Deut 4:13 and 10:4, we can translate עשרת הדברים literally as "the ten words" and imagine an analogous argument concerning how many "words" there are in each of "the ten commandments" (as it is usually translated). Is "observe the sabbath day and keep it holy" (Deut 5:12) only one "word" among "the ten words"? But it certainly looks like more than one "word" to us modern literate readers! We must keep in mind, however, that the ancient Israelite unit of meaning or "word" may not correspond to our own highly literate understanding of "word" as we struggle to understand more about the primarily oral culture in which the ancient Israelite scribes lived and worked.

## II. Text Critical Variants of "Words"

The text-critical evidence of the Hebrew Bible that suggests most strongly that the ancient Israelite scribes also had an oral mentality are the numerous synonymous readings found in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>12</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon defined synonymous readings as follows:

The class of synonymous readings will include only those variants which do not affect the subject matter of the text, are derived correctly according to Hebrew grammatical and stylistic rules, cannot be accounted for as being deliberate or due to slips of the pen or lapses of memory, and (as far as our knowledge goes) do not spring from different linguistic strata distinguishable — from one another in point of time, place, or class in society.<sup>13</sup>

Below are two examples of synonymous readings taken from 2 Kings 18–20 // Isaiah 36–39 and one from 2 Kings 25 // Jeremiah 52.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Shemaryahu Talmon, "Synonymous Readings in the Textual Traditions of the Old Testament," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 8 (1961) 335–83, for a detailed discussion of numerous examples.

<sup>13</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon, "Observations on Variant Readings in the Isaiah Scroll (1 QIsa<sup>a</sup>)," in *The World of Qumran from Within: Collected Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989) 122.

<sup>14</sup> These examples and many others from these passages are discussed in R. F. Person, Jr., *The Kings/Isaiah and Kings/Jeremiah Recensions* (BZAW 252; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997).

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|-----------------|--------------|
| (1) 2 Kgs 18:25 | על המקום הזה |
| Isa 36:10       | על הארץ הזאת |

Since מקום and ארץ sometimes occur in synonymous parallelism (e.g., Isa 5:8; 7:23–24), these two phrases are synonymous readings that probably occurred at an early stage of development.

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|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| (2) MT 2 Kgs 19:9               | וישב וישלח מלאכים       |
| MT Isa 37:9                     | וישמע וישלח מלאכים      |
| 1QIsa <sup>a</sup> 37:9 (= LXX) | וישמע וישב וישלח מלאכים |

MT Kings and MT Isaiah contain synonymous readings that are conflated in 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>.

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|----------------------------|------------------------|
| (3) MT 2 Kgs 25:30 (= LXX) | כל ימי חיו             |
| LXX Jer 52:34              | עד יום מוחו            |
| MT Jer 52:34               | עד יום מוחו כל ימי חיו |

The formulae in MT Kings and LXX Jeremiah are synonymous. MT Jeremiah conflates the readings.

As we can see in these examples, what Talmon called synonymous readings might be called synonymous “words.” That is, even though the synonymous readings might contain more than one of our “words,” each phrase of the synonymous reading is itself a unit of meaning and, therefore, could be understood as a דבר, a “word,” analogous to each of the “ten commandments” being understood as a “word.” This is certainly the case with synonymous formulae as in example (3). According to Talmon, the parallel structure of Hebrew poetry fixed some of the synonymous readings together as pairs. Talmon wrote, “pairs of words . . . which were regularly used as synonyms . . . became so closely wedded to each other that the mention of one pair automatically evoked the mention of the other.”<sup>15</sup> If this is the case, and I agree that it is, we can easily understand how one reading is substituted by its synonymous reading, especially within a primarily oral culture.

Another class of text-critical variants that suggests that the ancient Israelite scribes may have approached the task of copying texts with an oral mind-set are additions providing specificity. As E. Tov, W. McKane, and others have noted, the majority of variants between LXX Jeremiah and MT Jeremiah consist of additions of titles, proper names, adjectives, adverbs, divine names and epithets, and standard prophetic formula in the expansive MT.<sup>16</sup> A few examples follow with the MT additions in parentheses:

<sup>15</sup> Talmon, “Synonymous Readings,” 337

<sup>16</sup> See E. Tov, “Some Aspects of the Textual and Literary History of the Book of Jeremiah,” in *Le livre de Jérémie Le prophète et son milieu, les oracles et leur transmission* (ed P.-M. Bogaert, BETL 56, Leuven Leuven University Press, 1981) 145–67, E. Tov, “The Literary History of the

## Addition of titles:

Jer 28:5 (ויאמר ירמיה (הנביא) אל חנניה (הנביא))

## Addition of proper names:

Jer 21:2 (נבוככראצר)

Jer 52:16 (נבזראדן)

## Addition of patronymics:

Jer 28:4 (יכניה (בן יהויקים מלך יהודה))

Jer 36:8 (ברוך (בן נריה))

## Addition of divine names and epithets:

Jer 29:21 (כה אמר יהוה (צבאות אלהי ישראל))

Again, if we keep in mind that the ancient scribes' understanding of "word" is larger than our own, these variants are only variants from our literate point of view. Those familiar with the tradition know that Jeconiah was the son of Jehoiakim and was king of Judah, so any combination of these labels for Jeconiah (including his other names, Coniah and Jehoiachin) all refer to the same individual—that is, they could all be understood as the same דבר, the same "word." This kind of variation in characters' names and titles is common in oral traditions. For example, John Miles Foley demonstrates that the two Homeric formulae *kydimos Hermēs* ("honored Hermes") and *kratys Argeiphontes* ("mighty slayer of Argos") refer not only to each other but to the entire mythic story of the Greek character Hermes, thereby explaining their interchangeability in the tradition.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Talmon's comments concerning synonymous readings may also apply to this type of variant: that is, for example, the name Jeconiah is automatically associated with his patronym, titles, and events surrounding his reign, so that the copyist may not even be conscious that he is writing down what from our perspective includes additional words.

The most important information for scribal transmission comes from our understanding of the scribal process as practiced at Qumran, because of the

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Book of Jeremiah in the Light of Its Textual History," in *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (ed. J. Tigay; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) 211–39; E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 319–27; W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah 1: Introduction and Commentary of Jeremiah I–XXV* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) l–lxxxiii; L. Stulman, *The Prose Sermons of the Book of Jeremiah* (SBLDS 83; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 141.

<sup>17</sup> Foley, *Singer in Tales in Performance*, 156–60.

presence of scribal interventions or “corrections” in the manuscripts.<sup>18</sup> For example, the Isaiah scroll (1QIsa<sup>a</sup>) includes scribal interventions in a variety of forms, such as omissions by crossing out a word with a horizontal line or the use of cancellation dots as well as supralinear and marginal additions of letters, words, and phrases.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes these interventions are made by the original scribe himself; other times by a later scribe.<sup>20</sup>

Some of the interventions suggest that the original scribe of 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> may have approached the task of copying his *Vorlage* with an oral mentality. For example, the scribe first wrote מלך יהודה חזקיהו in 36:4. The words מלך יהודה are to be omitted as suggested by the cancellation dots placed above each letter. Since the MT and the LXX of both Isa 36:4 and its parallel in 2 Kgs 18:19 do not contain this title, it is most likely the result of the scribe unconsciously adding the phrase as he copied the *Vorlage*.<sup>21</sup> This is consistent with the argument made above for the influence of an oral mentality in the copying of texts. The scribe associated unconsciously the name Hezekiah and the title “king of Judah” and wrote both down. However, the original scribe clearly proofread his own text by comparing it to the *Vorlage* and made corrections, sometimes just the addition of one letter (e.g., 1:1: יש[ע] ידו—the ע is a supralinear addition correcting the misspelled name) and sometimes the addition of entire verses (e.g., 37:6–7).<sup>22</sup> Such proofreading and correcting of the text betray a literate mentality. In fact, 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> provides evidence of a later scribe also proofreading and correcting the text, possibly by comparing it with a Hebrew manuscript that was not the original scribe’s *Vorlage*.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the presence of מלך יהודה with supralinear cancellation dots provides evidence of an oral mentality *and* a literate mentality in the copying of the text. In other words, although some variant readings can be explained as the result of an oral approach in the copying of the texts, the proofreading and correction of texts are clearly literate activities. This

<sup>18</sup> See F. M. Cross and S. Talmon, eds., *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); and E. Tov, “The Textual Base of the Corrections in the Biblical Texts Found at Qumran,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research* (ed. D. Dimant and U. Rappaport; STDJ 10; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 299–314. Tov uses the more neutral “scribal intervention” to denote that the “correction” may actually be moving further away from the original text. His language is used here.

<sup>19</sup> See Tov, “Textual Base of the Corrections,” for a full discussion of the types of scribal corrections in the Qumran materials.

<sup>20</sup> M. Burrows, ed., *The Dead Sea Scroll of St. Mark’s Monastery*, 1, *The Isaiah Manuscript and the Habakkuk Commentary* (New Haven: ASOR, 1950) xv; M. Burrows, “Variant Readings in the Isaiah Manuscript,” *BASOR* 111 (1948) 16–26; 113 (1949) 24–32.

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion of this and other variants in 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, see Person, *Kings/Isaiah and Kings/Jeremiah Recensions*, 8–79.

<sup>22</sup> Burrows, *Isaiah Manuscript*, xv; idem, “Variant Readings” [Part 2], 32.

<sup>23</sup> Burrows, *Isaiah Manuscript*, xv.

is consistent with Niditch's conclusion that "Israelite *writing* is set in an oral context."<sup>24</sup>

### III. Implications

Even though the ancient Israelite scribes were among the most literate in their society, they were nevertheless influenced significantly by the primarily oral culture in which they lived. Therefore, the ancient Israelite scribes' oral mentality allowed for variation as they copied texts. That is, since their understanding of "word" probably included what we would call phrases and lines, what they possibly understood as a faithful copy of their *Vorlagen* we would understand as containing variants. This seems to provide an explanation for many of the variants that arose in the pre-Masoretic period, especially including but not limited to synonymous readings.

This position builds on the reevaluation of text criticism and its goals in light of the evidence from Qumran, but it goes further than text critics have been willing to go thus far. Shemaryahu Talmon is representative of the way in which many text critics view their work. He has argued that the idea of a Hebrew *textus receptus* is anachronistic when applied to early Judaism.<sup>25</sup> If there was no *textus receptus*, then some of the "variant" readings should be understood simply as alternative readings. Concerning synonymous readings, Talmon wrote, "These alternative readings are not really 'variants,' since they originated at a time when there was not yet a standard text from which they could be said to have deviated."<sup>26</sup> Note that Talmon makes this observation concerning synonymous readings that "cannot be accounted for as being deliberate or due to slips of the pen or lapses of memory."<sup>27</sup>

If the ancient Israelite scribes' activity was influenced by an oral mentality, then Talmon's conclusions move in the proper direction but stop short. As Talmon suggests, the idea of a Hebrew *textus receptus* is anachronistic, and some of what earlier text critics called "variants" must be understood now as alternative readings. However, Talmon's conclusions appear to be based on a literate understanding of a unit of meaning ("word"), which allows for fewer alternative readings than suggested above. That is, Talmon's understanding of what is a "deliberate" change in a text is too narrowly defined. For example, the addition of a title to a proper name need not be understood as a "deliberate" addition providing specificity, as is often assumed. Rather, the oral mentality of

<sup>24</sup> Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 88 (emphasis mine).

<sup>25</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon, "Aspects of the Textual Transmission of the Bible in the Light of Qumran Manuscripts," in *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text* (ed. F. M. Cross and S. Talmon; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 228.

<sup>26</sup> Talmon, "Observations on Variant Readings," 126–27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

the scribe might have been *unconsciously* influenced by his knowledge of that particular biblical character and possibly a general tendency in the tradition to provide such specificity. In addition, such a general tendency itself did not necessarily begin with a conscious decision of some scribe(s); the social environment may have simply influenced the transmission process. Therefore, when the transmission process is understood within the context of an oral culture, Talmon's understanding of alternative readings needs to be broadened beyond synonymous readings to include various other types of "variants."

As noted above, at least some scribes at Qumran proofread their work. This would seem to support Talmon's literate understanding of "deliberate." Even though the initial copying may have been influenced by an oral mentality (as argued above), the process of proofreading and "correcting" the copy suggests the scribes' attempt to reproduce their *Vorlagen* verbatim (a literate approach). That is, these scribes appear to be very "deliberate" in "adhering *faithfully* to the MS which [they] had chosen, or had been assigned, as the *Vorlage* for [their] own copy."<sup>28</sup> Although this may be the case for most of the Qumran scribes, it is not necessarily the case for them all. Even if it is, this would not necessarily be the case for other scribes of early Judaism. In fact, the variety among the biblical texts from Qumran suggests that those scribes who were responsible for producing the pre-Qumran versions of these texts were probably not as "careful" and "deliberate" (in a literate sense) in their copying as the Qumran scribes were. Of course, earlier scribes who approached the copying of texts with a more oral mentality would certainly not understand themselves as producing inferior texts; rather, their own understanding of "deliberate" copying would have allowed more variation than Talmon suggests.

When we take seriously the possibility that even the literate activity of copying texts was influenced by an oral mentality, we may begin to understand more clearly how "careful" scribes in ancient Israel produced texts with what appears to us to be "variants." Rather than copying the texts verbatim in a good literate manner (what we expect of ourselves), the ancient Israelite scribes performed the texts faithfully for their communities in their act of copying, often without changing what they would understand as a "word." However, their understanding of "word" and ours differ; therefore, they produced texts with what we perceive as "variants."

<sup>28</sup> Talmon, "Aspects of the Textual Transmission," 256 (emphasis mine).



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