ORALITY AND LITERACY IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES.
SOME NEW HERMENEUTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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1 ORIENTATION AND GENERAL THESIS

In an article earlier this year in *New Testament Studies*, John Halverson criticises Werner Kelber (1983) for 'positing an almost metaphysical split between speech and writing' in his analysis of the Marcan Gospel (Halverson 1994:180). While I do not wish to involve myself in the Marean debate, it appears to me that Halverson assumes that, having pointed out extensive evidence for the use of writing in New Testament times, he has made his point. He concludes by saying, 'In such a verbal ambiance, where orality and textuality are so inextricably intermingled, there would seem little hope of separating out something called "oral mentality"—and little purpose in doing so' (Halverson 1994:183). In this I beg to differ with him.

While Kelber may be criticised for drawing too direct and unambiguous conclusions from the fact that the gospel narrative was written down, there is a wider issue at stake, namely the oral hermeneutics underlying much of the Biblical text. In order to appreciate this issue adequately, we need to develop a general conception of orality and literacy in first-century culture and in the New Testament.

The study of orality in the New Testament has come a long way since J G von Herder in 1796-97 first drew the attention of Biblical scholars to the fact that Christianity did not begin with books but with oral preaching. Form criticism since the 1920s and redaction criticism since the 1950s have brought major advances in applying this insight to New Testament studies. The works of Gerhardson, Riesner and Kelber and his critics represent the most recent phase in this endeavour (for an overview see Gerhardson 1990). The thesis of this paper, is that, in the light of present developments, the stage is now set for a 'third generation' of New Testament orality studies. This is suggested by Gerhardson in his article on the Oral Tradition (New Testament) in *A dictionary of Biblical interpretation* (Coggins & Houlden 1990:498-501). He mentions that today,

there are reasons for thinking once more about the early church fathers' theme...that the gospel is a spoken word...Awareness of the fact that the gospel is by nature a spoken word is essential for a sound interpretation of the holy scriptures of the church. It is a guard against a tendency...to think that the church believes in the Bible, and not in...
the triune God, and it counteracts dead ecclesiastical routine, legalism, and traditionalistic literalism in interpretation (1990:500-501).

2 ORALITY AND FIRST-CENTURY MANUSCRIPT CULTURE

Recent scholarship has pointed out the complex interrelatedness of the oral and written word in ancient times. This was unquestionably the case for the New Testament world. In an illuminating chapter on literacy and orality in the Roman world, Rosalind Thomas (1992:158ff) draws our attention to a number of interesting aspects:

* Performance and oral presentation remained crucial in the first two centuries despite the presence of written documents. Eloquent speech remained the most characteristic feature of Graeco-Roman civilisation, even in its most learned manifestations. Even Quintilian disapproved of the extensive use of note-books, believing that you should never write out anything which was not intended to be memorised.
* Texts were regarded as an aid to memorisation of what had been passed on orally by a teacher.
* A fluid process of interpretation and tradition in the schools eschewed a strict regard for verbatim accuracy or individual intellectual copyright.
* The use of inscriptions for power and display were not indicative of a general literacy, and in certain parts of the empire literate skills were almost non-existent.

The general conclusion we can draw from information such as the above, is that first-century literary conventions were still largely dependent on speech conventions. This compels us to take note of orality and oral conventions if we want to make any sense of first-century manuscripts (as Birger Gerhardson states in the above quotation). To my mind, it is this very fact that H D Betz overlooked when he tried to interpret Galatians in the light of a 'literary' rhetoric.

As is already evident, there was a specific kind of interaction between the written and spoken word in manuscript culture which differed from the interaction we find in present-day modern culture. This peculiar interaction had a distinct influence on the status and function of written texts in the first century. Lit-

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1 Dewey (1989:33) states that 'in a manuscript culture with high residual orality, there is a considerable overlap between orality and textuality'. She says further: 'Writing at first was basically a transcription of oral performing since no other compositional methods were then known. Then writing exaggerated oral techniques, employing even more topoi or creating even more extensive and elaborate structural patterns, since writing enabled a composer to do better what he or she was already doing.'

2 Cf H Lausberg (1983), whose book on classical rhetoric bears the title, Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik.
eracy therefore had a different function and meaning from literacy today. We should not use the complexity of the issue as an excuse to naively project our own literary biases onto the texts and audiences of the first century. In other words, we should develop a distinct idea of the conventions of first-century manuscript culture as part of our hermeneutical task.

From various sources we can form a generalised picture of orality and literacy in the world in which the Pauline corpus was produced.

Jesus, Paul's Lord, spoke Aramaic and read classical Hebrew in the synagogue. He probably could understand some koine Greek. Nevertheless, He and his disciples depended almost completely on the oral medium for their teaching. The Roman Empire wielded power by means of written statutes and inscriptions (also on crosses). The seals in Revelation are a reflection of the authority of the Roman legal document. An estimated 3% of the total population of the Empire were conversant with a high manuscript culture. Ordinary people could read no more than a few letters on coins and inscriptions, in spite of a rich classical heritage. Neither Jew nor Greek experienced their deepest intellectual quests as literary enterprises. During the Diaspora emissaries carried letters of introduction, but the function of these letters was to support the authority of the emissaries and not vice versa. Scribes, sometimes using shorthand, formed a powerful class of their own, often acting on behalf of the semi-literate and the illiterate (cf Botha 1993: 747-748). Writing was seen as secondary to the spoken word and regarded as supportive of it. Eloquence was regarded as synonymous with statecraft, power and learning. The Roman practice of book burning was reminiscent of the magical properties ascribed to writing and cannot be evaluated in terms of modern censorship norms. General public and intellectual life in the first century remained structurally almost untouched by the facilities of writing. As Walter Ong has shown, the results of literacy only made themselves known gradually over longer periods of time. This oral consciousness exhibited a tenaciousness that extended even beyond the Middle Ages (cf Ong 1982a: 115-116).

If we take into account that manuscript writing resembled spoken discourse to an extent that we can hardly imagine today, being done without any capital letters, punctuation marks or spaces between the words, sentences, paragraphs or pages, we can perhaps appreciate how much closer manuscripts were to the spoken word than today. Funk (1966:248-9) states, for example, with regard to the Pauline letter that it '... is as near oral speech as possible'.

To understand many conventions in the Pauline material, it may not be necessary to go back further than the conventions of manuscript culture. In order to facilitate communication through scriptio continua, it is necessary to develop a number of rhetorical conventions—for example, the foregrounding of the most important word in a sentence, chiasms, parallelisms and ring compositions. These literary mechanisms closely resemble the mnemonic mechanisms so abundant in
In dealing with orality and literacy in the Pauline corpus, we should distinguish between the global linguistic and epistemological patterns associated with orality, and specific attitudes and positions on the issue found in the text. Let us first examine the latter.

3.1 Data on manuscripts
In 2 Tm 4:13 Paul says: ‘When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.’ From this we can gather that Paul not only had manuscripts, but that he had to do without them for long periods. Probably they would have proved too cumbersome on the voyage from Troas to Macedonia.

3.2 Data regarding the nature of Pauline epistles
The theme of Paul's παρουσία/absence is quite extensive in several of the epistles. This theme is further supported and extended by his travelogues (Kelber 1983:141). From this it is evident that Paul's letters were seen as temporary and reluctant extensions of his personal presence. His letters are to be regarded as the renewal of an oral presence in the past, and the promise of one in future.

From the texts we can also gather that the letters accompanied Paul's collaborators as introductory letters. The emissaries, and not the letters, were his representatives in the first instance. Most probably they (or one of the addressees) had to read the letters with the style and intonation of the Apostle himself, augmenting the message in the process.

Different from modern letters, Paul's letters were not only modelled to be read aloud, but his use of amanuenses suggests that at least some of them were written ‘aloud’, i.e. they were written records of oral discourses (cf 2 Th 3:17; Gl 6:11; 1 Cor 16:21; Col 4:18; Phlm 19). The letters are, of course, not direct transcriptions of oral communications, as is clear from their rich lexis and well-organised structures (cf Brown and Yule, 1983:14-9, for the paratactical style of oral texts). They are rather condensed and ‘frozen’ vestiges of Paul's lively and dynamic oral discourses.

Though Paul mentions the use of books, his Old Testament citations most probably came from the ‘aural’ Septuagint he encountered in the synagogues (cf Folker, S 1985. Argumentation bei Paulus, as cited by Vos, 1990:34). It is highly probable that Paul cited from memory. Koch (as quoted in Stanley 1990:78) found that 56% of Paul's citations are intentionally modified, which is exceptionally high in comparison with Plutarch (6%), Heraclitus (15%), Strabo (24%), On The Sublime (50%), and the Letter to Apollonius (52%). The freedom with which
the citations were contextualised can only be understood with reference to the vestiges of orality specific to the Pauline context. The LXX was part of Paul's oral equipment. Also his exegesis of the LXX was more reminiscent of the haggadah and halakah oral interpretations of the Torah than that of his learned contemporary, Philo.

From extensive comparisons of Pauline concepts with those of contemporary literary works (e.g., the letters of Seneca), it is clear that the sparse 'citations' and borrowing of ethical terms from Hellenistic sources came from the ordinary walks of life (cf Enslin 1957:90-106). The same may be said of Paul's rhetorical techniques—they arise from the oral performances in the schools and streets rather than from any literary activity. Whereas Plato already exhibited a tendency to abstract theorising, this is absent in the Pauline texts (cf Foley 1988 where he summarises Havelock's findings in his last chapter).

In the light of the above evidence, one can agree with Walter Ong when he says: 'The orality of the mindset in the Biblical text, even in its epistolary sections, is overwhelming' (1982a:75, referring to 1967b:176-91). The rhetorical conventions of orality were still largely intact in the Pauline world.

A further noteworthy aspect is the fact that the Pauline corpus received only superficial attention from the church fathers in the first two centuries. This is corroborated by the remark in 2 Pet 3:15-16 that:

...our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

This early testimony to difficulties in understanding Paul, is evidence of the ad hoc and oral nature of his epistles. Because the rhetorical situations are not adequately reflected in the letters, the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of the argumentation soon became obscured. Initially the presence of personal emissaries performing/reading the letters precluded such a misunderstanding.

3.3 Some explicit data on orality and literacy in the Pauline epistles

Without pretending to be exhaustive, we can investigate some explicit data on orality/literacy in the Pauline corpus. In the Corinthian correspondence we find Paul defending his gospel on two fronts—against the sophists and against Judaising opponents.

(a) In 1 Cor 1-2 he defends it against the crafty eloquence of the sophists

2:1: When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. .. 2:4: My message and my preaching
were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power.

It may seem as though he is prejudiced against rhetorical/oral skills in favour of letters. This, however, is not the case. He is merely making a point on behalf of the power of the word. As Kelber, drawing on a wide range of scholarship, has shown, the concept of the word as an effective and pro-active force, becomes comprehensible within the ambiance of orality (1983:144-149). There can be no question that Paul's argument is against a superficial eloquence, and for a dynamic oral proclamation of the message of the cross.

(b) In 2 Corinthians Paul explicitly ridicules his opponents who try to prove their authority with letters. His argument then takes an interesting twist when he associates the dependence of his opponents on written letters with their dependence on the Law by describing the Law as a letter that kills.

2 Cor 2:17: Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity.... 3:1: ...Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? 3:2: You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. 3:3: You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.... 3:6: [God] has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

From the above, it is clear that Paul is exploiting the general anti-literate bias of his audience in his persuasive strategy. This bias is also evident in his statement that the living congregation itself is his letter of recommendation. Kelber has rightly shown that this contrast between the interiority of the spirit/heart and the exteriority of the written word should be understood within the context of an oral hermeneutic (1983:146-147). It is further interesting to note that in the early phases of cheirographic culture in classical Greece, the wording on inscriptions was invariably written in the first person as if the monument itself was speaking. One cannot avoid the thought that a similar, naive, conception of the written word, was conducive to Paul's statement that the congregation itself is the speaking letter of recommendation he is carrying with him.

In 2 Cor 10:10-11, in a somewhat different context, Paul rejects the congregation's appreciation of the eloquence of his own letters, while maintaining that they are mere extensions of his oral presence.

2 Cor 10:10: For some say, 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.' 10:11: Such people should realize...
that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.

In Galatians we find another interesting evidence of an anti-literary bias:

6:11: See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand! 6:12: Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised.

From his remark we can gather that writing in large letters and boasting were not far apart in the minds of his audience. Further, it appears that it was not self-evident that Paul would write to them in his own hand. Paul's previous identification of the Law with a slave-driver (3:24) may not be a conscious expression of an anti-literary bias, but it certainly fits in the wider frame of reference in which the interiority of the spirit is contrasted with the boastful exteriority of people who depend on the Law.

3.4 Conclusion
Both implicit and explicit data in the Pauline texts, the casual use of contemporary epistolary conventions, the absence of abstract argumentation and the use of oral forms (e.g. greeting formulae, doxologies, hymns, logia) bear witness to the oral nature of the work. By way of summary we can graphically describe Paul's cultural position as follows:

Because of its oral base, Pauline theology differs fundamentally from the literary-based theology of Philo and the later rabbinical schools (cf Patte, 1983:87-120, esp p 107). The closest parallel to its style is the Stoic diatribe, which also has an oral background (cf Stanley 1981. *The diatribe and Paul's letter to the Romans*, as cited by Vos 1990:31). In the letters we encounter Paul the oral theologian.

Can it therefore be expected that Paul's epistemological patterns will also share features common with those in predominantly oral cultures? Can it be that, in spite of some modifications due to the presence of an advanced manuscript culture, we would, at a deeper level, find some themes and trends that are remi-
niscent of those in predominantly oral cultures? Does one have to make a ‘metaphysical’ distinction between orality and literacy to isolate an oral dimension in Pauline thought? I shall address this question in the next section.

4 GLOBAL PATTERNS IN PAULINE THOUGHT RELATED TO ORALITY

The terms ‘oral mentality’, ‘oral frame of mind’, ‘oral hermeneutic’ have given rise to a certain degree of misunderstanding. From the arguments above it is clear that the mere presence of literary activity does not invalidate or exclude the possibility of a profound oral dimension in the Pauline texts.

It stands to reason that it would be a gross oversimplification to define a general ‘oral mentality’ and then ascribe it to Paul wherever we find traces of it in his texts. For all it matters, we might just as well do the same with any contemporary work of literature. In all societies there is a holistic interaction and interdependence between the media of communication, social conditions and epistemological structures. Whereas changes in all these fields affect one another synchronically, the nature of the interaction is bound to change over longer periods of time. It is in the light of this, that an awareness of conventions and patterns in traditionalistic oral societies can offer us clues for understanding first-century texts in a manner that is not obvious to us because of our cultural prejudices. (Having taught students from an African rural background for some years, I have come to the conclusion that in some instances they have a better ‘empathy’ for the Biblical text than I have.)

The following are a few areas in which such an affinity between thought and language patterns in predominantly oral societies and the Pauline world are obvious. The real point of interest is assessment of the modifications brought about by the specific circumstances in which the Pauline texts were produced.

4.1 The concept of the corporate personality

Kelber describes the unity between speaker, message and audience as an ‘oral synthesis’ and finds ample evidence of this in the Pauline text (1983:19,147). The subjective involvement and solidarity of the different parties in the Pauline text, for example the author, Christ, Adam, God, congregation and mankind have in the past been studied as the concept of the ‘corporate personality’, introduced by W Robinson.

This phenomenon corresponds with conventions in oral cultures which deal differently with concepts such as solidarity and individuality than modern cultures. Expressions in an oral culture are empathic and participatory rather than objectively distanced (Ong 1982a:45; Kelber 1983:150). With regard to Homer, Havelock remarks: ‘...the individual’s reaction is not expressed as simply individual or “subjective” but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the communal
“soul” (Ong 1982a:46 with reference to Havelock). In contrast to the manner in which the idea of the corporate personality operates in traditional societies, we find it to be the object of conscious reflection in the Pauline texts—perhaps a sign that this procedure was no longer so well-known to Paul's audience. However, our general observation regarding the empathic nature of oral communication helps us at least to understand why Paul’s typology was intelligible to his audience.

An insight into the typological hermeneutic which reconstructs a believer's psychological involvement with Christ can further lead to clearer descriptions of the Pauline sacramental and sacrificial language, and also the mimesis of Christ, expressions such as ‘in’ and ‘with’ Christ, and expressions such as, ‘he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again’ (2 Cor 5:15). It also follows that the ‘indicative’ does not refer to a salvational deed completed in the past which only has to be applied to the present. The ‘imperative’ is not a rational or speculative application of abstract principles, but the action of Christ in the presence of the believer.

Lastly, we can observe that the pragmatics of oral communication—in conjunction with the corporate, communal frame of thought of oral culture—necessitate a direct linking of leading concepts and this may be an explanation for the typological correspondence between anthropology, theology, soteriology, Christology and ecclesiology (e.g. 2 Cor 1:3-11 where comfort/hope in suffering, salvation in tribulations and deliverance from death are the binary typological features ascribed not only to Christ, but also to Paul and the congregation).

4.2 The efficacy of the word.
I have already referred to the phenomenon that the ‘power of the gospel’ is linked to the power of the spoken word (cf Rm 1:16, 1 Th 1:5; 1 Cor 2:4-5; 2 Cor 6:7). Every time the Gospel is proclaimed, God is calling ‘things that are not as though they were’ (Rm 4:17). An example of this is that Paul does not link the ‘logos’ to its content, but with its effect on the hearer (e.g. the ‘word of reconciliation’ in 2 Cor 5:19 refers primarily to the reconciliation effected by the gospel) (Kelber 1983:145).

Because of this we find in the Christological expressions a pro-active, performative tendency, a *hic et nunc* audacity, which evades all rationalising. God’s active presence is experienced in the oral proclamation of the gospel.

4.3 The soteriological significance and authority of the Apostle.
The empathic-typological feature of the Pauline text also sheds light on the natu-

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3 Cf Rm 6:9-11 ‘...since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.'
ralness with which Paul attached soteriological significance to his own presence. His own parousia in the congregations was of course differentiated from the parousia of Christ, but this does not rule out some striking similarities (cf 2 Cor 13:1-4,10, Gl 6:17).

Oral theory also assists us in understanding Paul's concept of authority, which to modern minds seems to border on paternalism. In oral culture knowledge is difficult to attain and therefore precious. Oral cultures are therefore conservative by nature. The wise men (elders), who are in a position to preserve knowledge, are held in high esteem. It is inevitable that this concept of authority stands in some relation to the authority of the Apostles. Therefore Paul could link his proclamation of the gospel to his authority. Rm 1:1 and 10:8, 2 as well as 2 Cor 10:8-10 presuppose that authority is vested in the oral proclamation of the word.

In addition, the interiority of Paul's message, and his notion of Christ's spirit speaking in him, is closely related to the concept of oral memory.

4.4 Time expressions
It is generally acknowledged that the time expressions by means of which Paul interprets the salvational events are extremely difficult to systematise. These temporal expressions are sparse, tend to vary from one passage to another and cannot be fitted neatly into a linear or circular pattern. In the passages where he reflects on the time-aspect he usually formulates in terms of two antithetical temporal coordinates which coincide with the motive for writing the letter. In Rm 3:21-26 there is, for example, a sharp contrast between the present and the past. In Rm 5:12-21 the time of Adam is contrasted with the time of Christ. Whereas the past is characterised by sin, the present is characterised by the abundance of grace. In Phlp 2:6-11 Christ's past humiliation is contrasted with his present and future exaltation. The Apostle is encouraging a grateful congregation towards even greater gratitude and joy. These antitheses are directly related to the context.

The time concept of oral culture may assist us in this regard. In oral cultures time is closely related to the presence of the word which possesses an imminence and immediacy which it has lost in literate cultures. Time expressions are indicative of the actuality of the spoken word. They express the value which the speaker and the audience attach to what is being said. This is the reason why the future can sometimes be expressed in the past tense. In addition to this, temporal expressions have the pragmatic function of compelling the audience to decisive action in the immediate future.

To Paul, as in oral culture, the present, and not the past, is the locus where God acts decisively. This causes a strong link between eschatology and proclamation, both representing different sides of the same coin. So, for example, the

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4 Kelber explains that Paul's gospel '...echoes the voiceprints of an oral authority' (1983:144,147).
cross and the resurrection are not seen only as past events. By their proclamation
they are experienced as present events controlling the present and the future.
Between events such as the crucifixion itself and the 'word of the cross' there is
much less distance than would be the case in literate culture.

Is it possible to identify some general eschatological trends in Paul? From an
oral point of view one could argue that the actuality of the Pauline temporal
expressions prevent us from describing his eschatology as progressive, realised or
futurist. It is only through the bias of a high-literacy culture that such perceptions
can be formed. The multiple contrasts between remote past/recent past,
past/present, present/future etc, reveal only one common feature, namely that the
latter component always surpasses the former (cf Rm 8:18,32; 1 Cor 15:19-20; 2
Cor 3:11). From this we may deduce an escalating tendency: God's deeds in
Paul's present surpass his glorious deeds in the past; his deeds in the future will
be the consummation of those in the present.

This escalation has to be conceived in a non-linear manner. A linear time con­cept misleads us by compelling us to identify one or more foci (e.g. at the begin­ning, in the middle or at the end) as integrative viewpoints. Paul's eschatology has
no such constant time foci.5

4.5 Contextuality
In describing the salvational deeds of Christ, various metaphors are used, depending on the immediate rhetorical situation (e.g. the use of wisdom metaphors when refuting a false doctrine of wisdom in 1 Cor 1:24ff; or the use of forensic meta­phors when explaining justification through faith in Rm 3:24-5)6. This is only
one example of how dependent the text is on the contingency of the situation. The question of how much leeway should be given to a contingency argument, becomes critical when the Christology of Colossians is considered to be an argument against Pauline authorship. While oral theory cannot give us conclusive evidence in one direction or another, it helps us to develop a sensitivity to the issues at stake.

From an oral point of view it may be argued that repetitive modifications are
natural due to the inevitably contextual character of oral texts. Oral commu­nication invariably necessitates direct contextual involvement of the speaker. It re­quires that every discourse must be introduced uniquely into a unique situation
(Ong 1982a:41). Pre-literate people think situationally rather than categorically
(Ong 1982a:52). 'The oral mind is uninterested in definitions' (Ong 1982a:47).

5 I believe Patte (1982, 1983) is correct when he suggests that the focus falls on God's deeds, or rather on the typological correspondence of the believers' experience of Gods deeds in the past, present and future. Beker's (1980, 1982, 1986, 1988, 1989) motif of imminence also helps to clarify the escalating tendency of Paul's eschatology.

6 This applies to most metaphors except for those in Jesus' titles which have a more general bearing ('Lord', 'Christ' etc).
The meaning of every word is thus controlled by the real-life situations of speaker and audience (Ong 1982a:47). Because a speaker cannot backtrack to edit his text, incongruencies which arise cannot be ironed out by means of an editing process. These are circumscribed by subsequent renditions. In the process, unnecessary information is continuously deleted from memory. Part of this must also hold true for the Pauline discourse. If we accept that the letters are ‘frozen’ relics of oral performances, the contextual nature of his utterances becomes intelligible. It can also explain the occurrence of breaks in Paul's argumentation, which are only rectified by subsequent discourses. It also explains why a simplistic harmonisation of Pauline thought is impossible.

4.6 Originality
Oral theory also assists us in assessing Paul as an original thinker. Milman Parry's study of Yugoslavian bards shows that their songs, though keeping the same metrum, were never sung exactly the same way twice. The same themes and formulae occurred, but they were 'stitched together or “rhapsodised” differently in each rendition—even by the same poet—depending on audience reaction, the mood of the poet or of the occasion, and other social and psychological factors' (Ong 1982a:59-60). Despite the differences, a singer would insist that his versions were identical (Ong 1982a:60). Even when vigorous leaders invent new conceptual universes they are presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors (Ong 1982a:42,48). The idea of originality and repetition in oral cultures is therefore totally different from that in modern literate cultures. Originality does not manifest in the invention of new stories or myths, but in developments due to the live interaction between speaker and audience during narration (Ong 1982a:41f). Traditionalism and contextuality are not experienced as opposites. Vansina (1965:26-7) even remarks that no attempt should be made to reconstruct an ‘original’ oral text. This has an obvious bearing on Paul who insisted that he was maintaining the tradition he received, although he never repeated the same Christological expressions.

4.7 Coherence
Oral theory also leads us to suspect that theories that presuppose a coherence in Pauline thought are to be preferred to the theories of opportunism or radical conceptual shifts. Because oral texts work incessantly with repetitive contextual modifications, it would be anachronistic to expect a homogenised system in Paul's thought. It would be normal for modifications to occur within the same discourse as well in successive discourses. Anomalies in the Pauline text may have appeared quite ‘normal’ to Paul and his audience (especially when ‘performed’ by his representatives). It is only in manuscript form, after the primary context has been obscured, that they begin to pose theological problems.
One also has to ask the more fundamental question as to why the whole enterprise of formulating a core or a deeper structural coherence (convictional pattern) was undertaken? Would it have been necessary for the first audiences who shared Paul's oral matrix? Is it not our cheiographic bias which compels us to project some kind of deep structure?

Without an insight into Paul's 'oral hermeneutic', it would be impossible to correlate the different elements of his thought. Orality itself does not provide us with a coherent centre, but the seemingly disparate elements of his thought—his eschatology, anthropology, contextual Christology, passion-mysticism, correlative personality, mimesis, etc—cannot begin to make sense without an awareness of the role orality played in the Pauline texts.

5 CONCLUSION

From the brief discussion, I hope it is clear that we are currently on the verge of a new, third generation of orality studies in the New Testament. At present analytical methods in this regard need to be refined. The social scientific and rhetorical studies in the Pauline texts will remain incomplete until they have come to terms adequately with the question of literacy and orality in Graeco-Roman manuscript culture. There are still too many studies that regard orality in the New Testament as being of a purely incidental nature (cf Teeple 1970). It is no wonder that the Biblical texts are regarded by so many scholars as being no different from the documents they have on their desks and computer screens.

It may be too simplistic to say, with Walter Ong, that the medium structures the message, but we should at least be open to the profound influences of orality and literacy in the first century. Orality has direct bearing on diverse matters such as the 'shame and honour culture' and power relationships. An oral reading of the Pauline texts, in the light of new hermeneutical insights, may perhaps not lead to immediate changes in positions, but it will encourage a sensitivity to the text. It will open us to the Pauline gospel as viva vox, because for Paul praedicatio verbum Dei est verbum Dei (Confessio Helvetica).

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