

‘IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM’: SACRED TEXTS IN AN ORAL CULTURE

Ben Witherington, III
Amos Professor of NT for Doctoral Studies
Asbury Theological Seminary

It has become by now a commonplace to point out that Paul and the other earliest Christians lived in what was largely an oral culture, by which is meant not merely that most ancients weren't literate (the vast majority seem not to have been) but that a solid preference for the oral word, the living voice over documents characterized that culture. The problem is, that the implications of these facts for how ancients viewed sacred texts, including how ancient Jews and Christians viewed sacred texts has seldom been recognized, much less discussed. For example, modern discussions of inter-textuality (e.g. the use of the OT in the NT) assume all too often that we can simply look at this data as texts in the modern sense, which in fact is not how they should be viewed. They were not meant for reading in the modern way we do reading today, nor were they as fixed as some studies of inter-textuality would have us believe.

In this paper I intended to discuss several inter-related topics: 1) the preference in the NT world for the living voice, and when it comes to God's Word the oral proclamation over the written; 2) the function of the nomina sacra in such a text; 3) the beliefs about how God's Word had inherent power and ability to accomplish what it states; 4) the rhetorical function of a sacred text in a culture that has such a text, in contrast with most Greco-Roman religion which had no such sacred book; 5) the importance of oracular prophecy in sacred texts as the closest thing to the verbatim of the living voice. It is hoped by exploring these topics that some progress can be made towards assessing how sacred texts, particularly the OT and NT, were viewed in antiquity, and indeed how the NT writers viewed the OT itself.

I. General Considerations¹

The literacy rate in those Biblical cultures seems to have ranged from about 5% to 20% depending on the culture and which sub group within the culture we are discussing.

¹ A much fuller discussion of these matters can be found in my little book New Testament Rhetoric, (Cascade: 2008).

Not surprisingly then, all ancient peoples, whether literate or not, preferred the living word, which is to say the spoken word. Texts were enormously expensive to produce—papyrus was expensive, ink was expensive, and scribes were ultra expensive. Being a secretary in Jesus' and Paul's age could be a lucrative job indeed. No wonder Jesus said to his audiences—'let those who have ears, listen'. You notice he did not ever say—'let those who have eyes, read'. Most eyes could not read in the Biblical period.

So far as we can tell, few documents in antiquity were intended for 'silent' reading, and only a few were intended for private individuals to read.² They were always meant to be read out loud and usually read out loud to a group of people. For the most part they were simply necessary surrogates for oral communication. This was particularly true of ancient letters.

In fact, most ancient documents including letters were not really texts in the modern sense at all. They were composed with their aural and oral potential in mind, and they were meant to be orally delivered when they arrive at their destination. Thus for example, when one reads the opening verses of Ephesians, loaded as it is with aural devices (assonance, alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, various rhetorical devices) it becomes perfectly clear that no one was ever meant to hear this in any language but Greek and furthermore, no one was ever meant to read this silently. It needed to be heard.

And indeed there was a further reason it needed to be orally delivered—because of the cost of making documents, a standard letter in Greek would have no separation of words, sentences, paragraphs or the like, little or no punctuation, and all capital letters. Thus for example imagine having to sort out a document that began as follows:
**PAULASERVANTOFCHRISTJESUSCALLEDTOBEANAPOSTLEANDSETAPART
 FORTHEGOSPELOFGOD.** The only way to decipher such a collection of letters was to sound them out-- out loud. There is of course the famous anecdote about St. Augustine and St. Ambrose. Augustine said that Ambrose was the most remarkable man he had ever met, because he could read without moving his lips or making a sound. Clearly, an oral culture is a different world than a largely literate text based culture, and texts

² Receipts for example, might well be an exception, and other mundane items like shopping lists, or accounting ledgers.

function differently in such a world. All sorts of texts were simply surrogates for oral speech, and this statement applies to many of the Biblical texts themselves.

It is hard for us to wrap our minds around it, but texts were scarce in the Biblical world, and often were treated with great respect. Since literacy was largely a skill only the educated had, and the educated tended to be almost exclusively from the social elite, texts in such a world served the purpose of the elite—conveying their authority, passing down their judgments, establishing their property claims, indicating their heredity and the like. But since all ancient people were profoundly religious, the most important documents even among the elite were religious texts.

What do texts in an oral culture tell us about their authors? It is too seldom taken into account that the 27 books of the NT reflect a remarkable level of literacy, and indeed of rhetorical skill amongst the inner circle of leaders of the early Christian movement. Early Christianity was not, by and large, a movement led by illiterate peasants or the socially deprived. The leaders of the movement mostly produced the texts of the movement, and the texts of the NT reflect a considerable knowledge of Greek, of rhetoric, and indeed of general Greco-Roman culture. This skill and erudition can only seldom be attributed to scribes, except in cases where scribes such as Tertius or Sosthenes (cf. Rom. 16 and 1 Cor. 1) had been converted and donated their skills to the movement. Even then, it appears they were largely just taking dictation from Paul. The letters we find in the NT are mostly far longer than secular letters of their era.

Actually they are *not in the main letters*, though they have epistolary openings and closings sometimes. They are in fact discourses, homilies, rhetorical speeches of various sorts which the creators could not be present to deliver to a particular audience, and so instead they sent a surrogate to proclaim them. These documents would not be handed to just anyone. From what we can tell, Paul expected one of his co-workers such as Timothy or Titus, or Phoebe to go and orally deliver the contents of the document in a rhetorically effective manner. This would have been almost a necessity since the document would come without division of words or punctuation and so only someone skilled in reading such seamless prose, and indeed one who *already knew* the contents of the document could place the emphases in the right places so as to effectively communicate the message.

This brings us to a related crucial matter. Some scholars, on the basis of the occasional reference to ‘readers’ in the NT have thought that this signaled that Christians were some of the first to self-consciously be trying to produce books, or even literature meant for reading. For example, sometimes Mark’s Gospel has been called the first Christian book, in large part based on the reference in Mk. 13.14 where we find the parenthetical remark, “let the reader understand”, on the assumption that the ‘reader’ in question is the audience. But let us examine this assumption for a moment. Both in Mk. 13.14 and in Rev. 1.3 the operative Greek word is **ho anaginōskōn** a clear reference to a single and singular reader, who in that latter text is distinguished from the audience who are dubbed the hearers (plural!) of John’s rhetoric. As Mark Wilson recently suggested in a public lecture at Ephesus, this surely is likely to mean that the singular reader is in fact a lector of sorts, someone who will be reading John’s apocalypse out loud to various hearers.³

We know for a fact that John is addressing various churches in Asia Minor (see Rev. 2-3), so it is quite impossible to argue that the reference to ‘the reader’ singular in Rev. 1.3 refers to the audience. It must refer to the rhetor or lector who will orally deliver this discourse to the audience of hearers. I would suggest that we must draw the same conclusion about the parenthetical remark in Mk. 13.14, which in turn means that not even Mark’s Gospel should be viewed as a text, meant for private reading, much less the first real modern ‘text’ or ‘book’. Rather Mark is reminding the lector, who will be orally delivering the Gospel in some or several venues near to the time when this ‘abomination’ would be or was already arising that they needed to help the audience understand the nature of what was happening when the temple in Jerusalem was being destroyed. Oral texts often include such reminders for the ones delivering the discourse in question.

How then did a sacred text function in an oral culture? For one thing it was believed that words, especially religious words, were not mere ciphers or symbols. They were believed to have power and effect on people if they were properly communicated and pronounced. It was not just the sacred names of God, the so-called ‘nomina sacra’, which were considered to have inherent power, but sacred words in general. Consider for

³ In a lecture delivered by him at a conference at Ephesus in May 2008 where we both spoke on the oral character of these NT texts.

example what Isaiah 55.11 says: “so shall my word be that goes forth out of my mouth: it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing I sent it to do.” The Word or words of a living and powerful God, were viewed as living and powerful in themselves.⁴ You can then imagine how a precious and expensive document, which contained God’s own words would be viewed. It would be something that needed to be kept in a sacred place, like a temple or a synagogue, and only certain persons, with clean hands and a pure heart would be allowed to unroll the sacred scroll and read it, much less interpret it.

From what we can tell, the texts of the NT books were treasured during the first century, and were lovingly and carefully copied for centuries thereafter. There is even evidence beginning in the second century of the use of female Christian scribes who had a ‘fairer’ hand, to copy, and even begin to decorate these sacred texts. But make no mistake—even such texts were seen to serve the largely oral culture. Before the rise of modern education and widespread literacy, it had always been true that “In the beginning was the (spoken) Word.”⁵ All of this has implications for how we should approach the NT, especially the more ad hoc documents in the Pauline corpus, and the other documents traditionally called letters in the NT, which often, in fact are not letters. 1 John is a sermon with neither epistolary opening nor closing. Hebrews is an even longer sermon, with only an epistolary closing, but of course no listener would ever have considered a letter on first hearing, because there were no signals at the outset of the document to suggest such a thing. And in an oral culture, opening signals are everything if the issue is—What sort of discourse or document am I listening to? This is why Lk. 1.1-4 is so crucial to judging the genre of that Gospel.

Given that the division between a speech and an orally performed text was more like a thin veil than a thick wall between literary categories it will not come as a surprise when I say that actually oral conventions more shape the so-called epistolary literature of the NT, than epistolary ones, and with good reason. This was not only because of the dominant oral character of the culture, but also more importantly because the Greco-

⁴ See my little book *The Living Word of God*, (Baylor Press, 2007).

⁵ It is interesting that an important literate figure like Papias of Hierapolis who lived at the end of the NT era repeatedly said that he preferred the living voice of the apostle or one who had heard the eyewitnesses to a written document. In this he simply reflected the normal attitude of ancient peoples, literate or not.

Roman world of the NT period was a rhetorically saturated environment, whereas the influence of literacy and letters was far less widespread so far as we can tell.

Here we need to come to grips with and understand an important fact—*the rise to prominence of the personal letter used as something of a vehicle for instruction or as a treatise of sorts was a phenomena which only really took root in the Greco-Roman milieu as a widespread phenomena with the letters of Cicero shortly before the NT era. Contrast this with the long history of the use of rhetoric going back to Aristotle, and use of it in numerous different venues.* Rhetoric was a tool useable with the educated and uneducated, with the elite, and also with the ordinary, and most public speakers of any ilk or skill in antiquity knew they had to use the art of persuasion to accomplish their aims. There were not only schools of rhetoric throughout the Mediterranean crescent, rhetoric itself was part of both elementary, and secondary and tertiary basic education as well. *There were no comparable schools of letter writing* not least because it was a rather recent art just coming to prominence in the first century A.D. And here we come to a crucial point.

Analyzing the majority of NT on the basis of epistolary conventions, many of which did not become de rigeur, nor put into an handbook until *after* NT times, while a helpful exercise to some degree, has no business being the dominant literary paradigm by which we examine the Pauline, Petrine, Johannine, and other discourses in the NT. The dominant paradigm when it came to words and the conveying of ideas, meaning, persuasion in the NT era was rhetoric, not epistolary conventions. This is why I will say now that most of the NT owes far more to rhetoric and its very long standing and widespread conventions than it ever owed to the nascent practice of writing letter-essays, or letter treatises. Most of the letters of the NT, with the exception of the very shortest ones (2-3 John, perhaps Philemon) look very little like the very mundane pragmatic epistolary literature of that era. In terms of both structure and content, most NT documents look far more like rhetorical speeches. Some are in fact straightforward sermons, ‘words of exhortation’ as the author of Hebrews calls his homily, some are more rhetorical speeches suitable for assemblies where discussion would then ensue (e.g. after dinner discussions at a symposium), but all are profitably analyzed in detail by means of rhetorical examination.

Not only so, but micro-rhetoric clearly enough shapes: 1) the chreia in the Gospel; 2) the speech summaries in Acts; 3) the way portions of a book like Revelation is linked together by catchword and A,B,A structure as well. In other words, rhetoric is not just something that illuminates Paul and other portions of the ‘so-called epistolary corpus’ in the NT. It is a necessary tool for analyzing it all. This is enough said for now by way of general considerations. I want to turn more specifically to the phrase Word of God, and how it is used in the NT, as well as elsewhere.

II. What does the phrase ‘the Word of God’ connote in the NT?

I cannot emphasize enough how the living voice was preferred to its literary residue if the speech was taken down, or written out before hand. Rhetoric, thank goodness, attended not just to logic and issues of content but to such things as gestures, tone of voice, speed of delivery, and the like, for we are talking about the ancient art of homiletics. Function dictated form, rather than form following function. This was all the more the case when it came to the proclamation of a profoundly religious message, especially one based on one or more sacred texts. Sacred texts had an aura, a presence, a palpable character, as the embodiment of the voice of a living god. Ancient peoples would write out their curses on lead foil, roll them up, and place them near or under the altar in a temple believing that the breath of the deity would animate and act out those words, because the word of a god was a speech-act indeed, an action word, that changed things, affected persons, could serve as either blessing or curse, boon or bane. *Nomen sacra*, or abbreviated forms of sacred names were believed to have inherent power in themselves, and indeed the very act of abbreviating such names could connote that the speaker was worried about mispronouncing the name, and hence losing contact with the name’s power.

In this light, let us hear a brief passage of one of Paul’s letters, which most scholars think is our very earliest NT document—1 Thessalonians. 1 Thess. 2.13 reads as follows: “And we also thank God continually because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”

Here is a text that cries out for adequate exposition. Firstly, we note that Paul refers to his own proclamation of the Gospel to the Thessalonians as ‘the word of God’, Paul has no doubt at all that he is speaking God’s very word to them, and you will notice he is not referring to pre-existing sacred texts from the OT. No, he is talking about the message conveyed about Jesus. Secondly, notice that he says that this preaching was by no means only, or even mainly his own words, or the words of human beings or human wisdom. What it really was, was God’s living word. Notice however he uses the singular. The phrase is ‘the word of God’ on par with previous things that could be called ‘the word of God’ ranging from the utterances of the OT prophets, to the sacred texts of the OT themselves. But primacy here is given to the spoken word of God, not to something written—a Good News word of God. Thirdly, Paul says that this word of God (singular) had lodged in the lives of the Thessalonians and it was still ‘at work in you who believe’. This word of God had taken up residence in the Thessalonian converts and was doing soul work in and on them. It was a living and active two edged sword penetrating their very being, just as the author of Hebrews was to suggestion Heb. 4.12-13, and he also was not talking about a text, he was talking about an oral proclamation which penetrates the heart. If we ask the question, did any of the NT writers believe they were writing Scripture, it seems to me that the answer must surely be yes if by Scripture one means the Word of God, because in the case of someone like Paul, he believed in the first place that he was speaking the very word of God to his converts, not merely his own words or opinions, and furthermore he saw his letters as just the surrogate for a speech he would have given in person had he been there. Letters are just the literary residue of discourses, with epistolary framework added since they must be sent from a distance.

In fact, if one does a detailed study of the phrase ‘Word of God’ in terms of the usage in the Bible (and its synonyms such as ‘my Word’ when the speaker is clearly God) it becomes clear that the phrase refers to the oral proclamation in the first instance, to a person in John 1, and not usually to a sacred text in the NT era. This is not because the ancients didn’t believe in inspired texts. Indeed, they did. Even the pagans did. Consider for example the following quotation:

“ For since you came when called for my salvation, how would you not come for your own honor? So taking heart I proceed to what remains, knowing that this encomium is on the one hand by the mind of a god but on the other hand written by a human being”

(**nous men Theou, cheipes de graphousin anthrōpou**).—‘Aretology of Isis’ lines 11-12⁶

Rather we may explain all this phenomena by the preference that existed for the living Word in antiquity, not a prejudice against the notion of an inspired writer word. More needs to be said about the latter now.⁷ Another early Pauline text of relevance to this discussion is 1 Cor.14.36-37 where Paul asks his audience if the Word of God originated with them or if they were the only ones that it had reached. Of course again he is not talking about the Corinthians having received a shipment of Bibles from the Gideons. He is talking about their having heard and received the oral proclamation of God’s Word from Paul and others. But what Paul goes on to say in vs. 37 is more than a little important. He adds “If any think they are prophets or are spiritually gifted, let them acknowledge that *what I am writing is the Lord’s command*.” Here finally we have a reference to a text being ‘the Lord’s command’ and not just any text. In this case the reference is to Paul’s own letter written to the Corinthians. Here we do indeed have the nodal idea of an inspired text being God’s Word, in this case involving some imperatives.

But of course it is not only Paul who has this concept that the Word of God is an oral proclamation which includes telling the story about Jesus and that it is a living and active thing. We see this in various places in the book of Acts. Several texts deserve brief mention. First we notice the reference in Acts 4.31 which speaks of the fact that the Holy Spirit of God filled all who were present (men and women) and they all ‘spoke the Word of God boldly’. In this text we begin to see the connection, which is already obvious in various OT prophetic texts (cf. e.g. Is.61.1—the Spirit of God prompts the preaching of the Good News) that it is the Holy Spirit, not merely the human spirit which inspires the speaking of God’s Word. Here already the concept of prophetic inspiration and revelation is transferred to the followers of Jesus, apparently to all of them, and all on this occasion and in this place are prompted to speak God’s Word boldly. Again, we are not talking about preaching from a text or preaching a text. We are talking about an oral proclamation of a late word from God.

⁶ 2nd B.C. inscription from Macedonia. See New Documents which Illustrate Early Christianity Vol. One ed. G. H.R. Horsley (Sydney: Macquarrie University, 1981), pp. 10-11.

⁷ Papias of course famously stated his own personal preference for the living voice of the apostles over documents, but this was not because he devalued documents. It is because he was a man of his age.

So much is the Word of God (in this case the proclamation about Jesus) seen as a living thing in Acts that remarkably we have texts like Acts 6.7 where we here how the Word of God itself grew and spread. This is not merely a personification of an abstract idea. The author believes that God's Word is alive, and when it is heard and received it changes human lives, takes up residence in them and so the very next sentence in this verse says 'the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased'. Note also Acts 12.24 where it is said that God's Word grew and spread.

We see this same sort of concept of the Word of God in the book of Hebrews. Heb. 4.12-13 is worth quoting in full: "for the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any two edged sword it penetrates even to the dividing of the soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all of creation is hidden from God's sight." Here again the subject of the phrase 'Word of God' is an oral proclamation. The focus is not on the after the fact literary residue of that proclamation, as is perfectly clear because the author speaks of it sinking into the inner being of the listener. But even more remarkable is the fact that here the 'Word of God' inside the believer is said to be analogous to God's eyes—it penetrates the innermost being of a person and judges the thoughts of their heart or mind, laying everything bare. Our author however is not the originator of these ideas. We can fruitfully compare what is said here with Psalm 139 where the focus is on the work of God's presence or Spirit. What is said in Ps. 139 about the Spirit is said here about the living and active Word. These two things are seen as going and working together. We have already seen the connection of Word and Spirit in Acts 4 as discussed above.

Another text of relevance to this discussion is 1 Pet. 1.23 which speaks of believers being born anew by "the living and abiding Word of God". This can certainly refer to the oral proclamation, but the term 'living' may also convey the sense of life-giving as it does for example in the phrase 'living bread' in John 6.51 and we may compare this as well to 1 Pet. 1.3 which speaks of a living hope which surely means more than merely an extant hope, or we may consider 1 Pet. 2.4-5 which speaks of believers as living stones of the new spiritual house of God. Stephen Llewelyn is right to point out that the phrase 'living image' was applied to a king who was said to be the living image

of some deity.⁸ When we hear the phrase the living Word of God then, we are meant to think of something that is actually God's Word and as such has life giving potential. Normally the phrase also connotes an oral proclamation of God's Word in some form.

Notice, that thus far we have said little about the other use of the phrase 'Word of God' in the NT to refer to Jesus himself (John 1), nor about the concept that the written OT is the Word of God as well. But we can now make some remarks about these other uses of the phrase. The Logos theology of the prologue to John's Gospel is often thought to be distinctive of this book but we may well see it also in 1 John 1.1-2 where we hear of the Word of Life, which seems to be synonymous with both Jesus (who could be touched), and with the message about Jesus as God's incarnate Word. Similarly in Rev. 19.13 the name of God's Son is said to be 'the Word of God'. We have seen some hints already of the notion that texts could be the Word of God as well, and now we must turn to more evidence of this by looking in detail at 2 Timothy 3.16 and some texts in Hebrews.

III. The Word made Scripture

Because of the enormous significance of 2 Timothy 3.16-17, we must necessarily go into considerably more detailed explanation of these verses, since whole theories about the nature of God's Word and of inspiration have been derived from these verses. Here, clearly enough the subject matter is a written text, in this case what Christians now call the Old Testament. The Old Testament was in fact the Bible of the earliest Christians, because of course the New Testament had not yet been written, collected or canonized. Indeed, even the OT canon, or list of included books, was not completely settled before the waning decades of the first century A.D. Here we must make an important distinction between 'the Bible' as one form that God's Word took, the written form, and the 'Word of God' which is, as we have already seen in this study, a much broader category, which in the first instance refers to inspired and powerful spoken words. The earliest Christians were neither without a Scripture (the OT) nor without the

⁸ New Documents which Illustrate Early Christianity Vol. Nine. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 37-38.

living voice, the oral Word of God, which, in their view now included Christian proclamation, especially the Good News about Jesus.

It is an interesting fact that the NT writers tend to say more about the inspiration of the OT than the OT writers themselves. For example in Mk. 12.36 Jesus tells his audience that David ‘in the Holy Spirit said...’ and then a portion of a Psalm is quoted. Or in Acts 1.16 we hear that the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of David predicted about Judas what would happen. 2 Pet. 1.21 can be compared at this point. We are thus not surprised to hear about the inspiration of OT figures in the NT, but 2 Tim. 3.16-17 goes a step beyond that in talking about an inspired text itself.

2 Timothy 3.16 is surely the most famous of the verses of 2 Timothy, cited over one hundred times in the patristic literature. There are however various ways it could be translated and each causes a variable in its meaning. It could read, for instance, ‘Every **graphē** (i.e. Scripture) is God-breathed and profitable/useful...’ so that/with the result that the person of God is ready, equipped for good works.’ Usually when **pas** (all/every) is used with a noun without the definite article it means ‘every’ rather than ‘all’. Thus the meaning seems likely to be ‘every Scripture’ or perhaps ‘every passage of Scripture’. Paul does use **graphē** in the singular to refer to the whole of Scripture in Rom. 11.2 but there we have the definite article (cf. also Gal. 3.22). Of course this means that ‘all Scripture’ is included but the emphasis would be on each one being God-breathed. Paul does not envision any Scripture that is not God-breathed.⁹ It would also be possible to read the verse to mean ‘Every inspired Scripture is useful...’ but against this view is that it is more natural to take the two qualifying adjectives as relating to the noun in the same way as in 1 Tim. 4.4.

A further issue is what to make of the adjective **theopneustos**. Its literal meaning is ‘God-breathed’ and it is indeed a term used in pagan literature, for example in reference to the Sibylline oracles (cf. *Sib. Oracles* 5.308, 406; Plutarch, *Or. at Delphi* 7; Pseudo-Phocylides, 121), and in the papyri (SIG 95; CMRDM 2.A8). We may again compare the example an aretology to Isis written in Macedonia which reads at one point “this encomium is written not only by the hand of a man, but also by the mind of a god”

⁹ Nor is it likely that the word ‘writings’ in the previous verse refers to both the OT and the Gospel message, which at this stage was not yet a written Gospel in all likelihood. ‘Sacred Writings’ is simply a collective noun for the works we call the OT.

(line 14).¹⁰ Greek words with the **-tos** ending tend to be passive rather than active, so we should not take this to mean ‘every Scripture is inspiring’ but rather ‘every Scripture is inspired’. What is meant is that God speaks through these words. God breathed life and meaning and truth into them all (see similarly Num. 24.2; Hos. 9.7 cf. Josephus, Apion 1.37-39; Philo, Moses 2.292; Spec. Leg. 1.65; 4.49; 2 Pet. 1.21).

Note that we are not given an explanation of how that works. This text by itself does not explicate a theory of inspiration or its nature. Does the Spirit lift the mind of the writer to see, understand, and write, or is it a matter of mechanical dictation? These questions are not answered here. What is suggested is that whatever the process, the product is God’s Word, telling God’s truth.

The emphasis here is actually on what it is good or profitable for—as a source of teaching about God and human beings and their ways, as a means of refuting false arguments or errors and offering positive ‘proofs’ and rebuking sin, and as a means of offering constructive wisdom and teaching on how to live a life pleasing to God. It will be seen then that the OT is largely viewed here as a source for ethical instruction and exhortation, which is not surprising given the emphasis in this letter. There is no emphasis here on it being a sourcebook for Christian theology, which would come more from the Christian kerygma and Christian tradition. We may also want to consult other places where Paul speaks about the nature of the OT Scriptures such as Rom. 15.3-4 or 1 Cor. 10.11 which confirms that Paul thinks that what we call the OT is very suitable for Christian instruction, especially for training in righteousness and other ethical matters.

There is debate about vs. 17 as to whether we should see it as a purpose or result clause. Is it the purpose of Scripture to fit a person of God for ready service, or is it the result and effect of Scripture that that happens? Probably this is a result clause. The result of learning Scripture is that one is equipped. It seems likely as well that since this is directed specifically to Timothy here that ‘person/man of God’ here refers to a minister of some sort. Paul then would be talking about equipping the minister by means of studying the Scriptures.

Using the rhetorical device of ‘gradatio’, Paul brings the list of what Scripture is useful for to a climax and conclusion with the phrase ‘training in righteousness’. Here

¹⁰ The full text is cited in New Docs Vol. 1 pp. 10-11.

righteousness surely has an ethical rather than a forensic sense, in keeping with the ethical focus of the rest of what Scripture is said to be useful for. Chrysostom puts it this way: “This is why the exhortation of the Scripture is given: that the man of God may be rendered complete by it. Without this he cannot grow to maturity” (Hom. 9 on 2 Tim.). Clearly, with this text, we are well on the way to a full blown theology of inspired written texts being God’s Word, being God’ breathed. What is interesting is that neither Paul nor the author of Hebrews views the OT as an example of what God *once* said, relegating the revelation and speaking to the past. No, it still has the life and power and truth of God in it, and it still speaks in and to the present.

Especially striking are the formula quotations in Hebrews, by which I mean the ways that the author of Hebrews introduces OT quotations in his quotation filled sermon. What is most striking about what we find in that sermon is that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all said to be the speakers of various OT texts! A few examples must suffice: As our author introduces a quotation from Deut. 32.43 at Heb. 1.6 we find the phrase “when God brings his first born into the world *he says*”-- noting the present tense verb of saying here. But in Heb. 2.11-12 in introducing a quotation from Ps. 22.22 we hear “So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. *He says...*” (cf. Heb. 10.5). Now Christ is depicted as speaking an OT text. And on multiple occasions we hear in Hebrews “as the Holy Spirit says” used to introduce various OT quotes (see Heb. 3.7; 10.16).

Two things stand out about this. It seems clear enough that our author already has the beginnings of a Trinitarian theology here. What Scripture says, God says, and the God who is said to be speaking these OT texts is Father, Son or Spirit. We do not yet have a text where all three of them are said to speak one particular passage of Scripture. Equally telling is the fact that the present tense verb keeps cropping up. The OT is not just for God’s original chosen people. It is viewed as a text which speaks directly and pertinently to Christians in the present. Furthermore, it is seen as speaking about a whole host of subjects including about God’s Son, not just about ethics. The author of Hebrews takes up stories from the OT, laws, covenants, as well as ethical material in order to convey the living Word of God about Jesus and Christian life to the audience.

Then too, the author enunciates a hermeneutic of progressive revelation from the very beginning of the book. He says that God revealed himself in various times and ways, or partially and piecemeal in the past, but now God has revealed himself fully and finally in the person of his Son (Heb.1.1-2). Clearly the incarnate Word is seen as the most crucial revelation of God, to which all early revelations prepare, foreshadow, or foretell. But this by no means causes him to suggest that the OT ceases to be God's Word when the Incarnate Word shows up. To the contrary, Jesus and the Christ event are seen as the hermeneutical keys to understanding the OT, but also the OT is understood as crucial to understanding the Christ event. There is some sort of symbiotic relationship between Word written, Word proclaimed and Word Incarnate envisioned.

One more text is of direct relevance to this sort of discussion, particularly in regard to the issue of inspiration and revelation. 2 Pet. 1.20-21 says "Above all you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." It is indeed normally about prophets and prophecy that we hear about the notion of inspiration, and this text seems to add a bit more to the discussion than 2 Tim. 3.16.

First of all there is here a contrast between prophecy that made it into Scripture and other prophecies. The author says that whatever may be the case about other prophecies, in regard to OT prophecy it cannot be a matter of purely private or individual interpretation or explanation. That is, the author thinks there is a meaning in the prophecy itself which makes a claim on the listener, and it is not for the listener to 'determine the meaning' of the text but rather to discover it. Indeed he even means it wasn't up to the prophet to interpret it or add his own interpretation to it. He was constrained by the source of the information to speak another's words and meaning—namely God's. This is made clearer in what follows in vs. 21. This latter verse speaks about the origins of true prophecy and insists that it does not originate as a matter of human will or ingenuity. To the contrary, it is the Holy Spirit that inspires the prophet. In fact the text literally says the prophet is carried along or forcefully moved by the Spirit to say what he or she does. The prophet is so led by the Spirit that his words can be said to be God's Words, originating from a divine source.

Much more could be said along these lines, but this will need to suffice as we draw this essay to a close. The living Word of God is seen as an oral message, an Incarnate person, and finally as a text, in particular the text of the OT. Its life, power, truth is a derived life, power, truth if we are talking about the oral or written Word. The source is God who inspires, speaks, empowers the words with qualities that reflect the divine character. It is right to say that Paul thinks that what he says, God is saying. It is right to say that both Paul and the author of Hebrews thinks that what the OT says, God says. It is right to say that these same writers think that what Jesus says, God says. Indeed, the author of Hebrews is audacious enough to suggest that the pre-existent Christ actually spoke some of the OT texts into existence! It is also right to say that the emphatic center and focus of the proclamation of ‘the Word of God’ by early Christians was Jesus and the Christ event in general. It is also right to say that some NT writers even reached the point of being able to talk about Jesus being the Word of God incarnate, come in the flesh, such that when Jesus spoke on earth, he not merely spoke for God, he spoke as God and indeed spoke about himself. The message and the messenger are one in this case.

IV. And So?

We can now briefly state what some of the implications of this study are for discussions of the use of the OT in the NT and the issues of inter-textuality. The first thing to be said of course is that while the OT canon was coming to a relatively fixed and closed form in the NT era, but that there was still debate about the inclusion of books like Esther.¹¹ What we should not assume is that the preference for the living voice somehow meant that a sacred text was seen as a second rate sort of Word of God. 2 Tim. 3.16 makes clear that would be a false assumption. What we can say is that Word of God as text was indeed secondary in the sense that it was an after the fact attempt in various cases to capture lightning in a bottle, and the more it was just a transcript of what was previously said by the living voice of God, the better. This attitude tended to foster a very conservative (in both senses of the word) approach to how to deal with oral tradition

¹¹ See my discussion in [What’s in a Word?](#) (Baylor, 2009).

and oral history.¹² Theories of inspiration only furthered the tendency to take a conservative approach to the writing down of the living Word of God.

The second thing to be said about these matters is that the NT writers believed clearly enough that God continued to speak in and through the OT Scriptures. Indeed, the author of Hebrews believed the Trinity spoke in that Scripture, Father, Son and Spirit. What Scripture said, God said, and this, and not some magical view of inherent qualities of sacred texts is what gave the text power in the view of NT writers. The issue of intertextuality comes into play precisely at this point. Because God's Word was always a living Word, it was in no sense thought to be encumbered by much less trapped in a particular historical context or locus. It was to be sure a Word on target originally, but it could be endlessly reapplied because it was part of the ongoing and living discourse and relationship between God and God's people, and those were givens in the equation. Intertextuality was not an exercise in making the text relevant for a later audience, but rather in seeing its relevance in light of later revelation, in this case the revelation in Christ. The OT was read not just with Christological spectacles by the earliest Christians, though that is true, it was read with the assumption that it was not merely a record of the formerly spoken Word of God, or a residue of that Word, but indeed rather it remained the living Word of God. The attempts to pit orality off against textuality in these sorts of discussions do not take into account the dialectic and dialogue between the two in a largely oral culture. Orality does not stand over against textuality, rather the latter is one form of expression of the former, especially perhaps when we are talking about the Word of God.

Much more could and should be said along these lines, but this must suffice for now. I am reminded of the Latin phrase that hovers over the entrance way to St. Mary's college at St. Andrews where I sometimes lecture----- "In principio erat verbum". As it turns out, even when we are talking about texts, 'in the end was the Word, as well.

¹² See now R.B. Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, (Eerdmans, 2005).