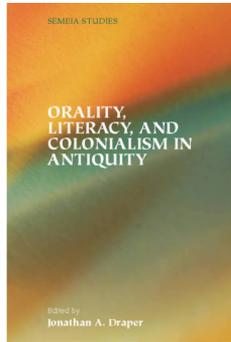


## ○ REVIEW OF *ORALITY, LITERACY AND COLONIALISM IN ANTIQUITY*, EDITED BY JONATHAN A. DRAPER

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Darren Jorgensen reviews *Orality, Literacy and Colonialism in Antiquity*, edited by Jonathan A. Draper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).



In the wake of postcolonialism, even thinking about ancient times is inflected with the politics of contemporary place. Many of the writers in this volume, specialists in the New Testament or oral traditions, are very concerned about the possibility of their own ethnocentrism. That this book came out of a colloquium on Southern Africa provides the institutional context for such paranoia, as the presence of local traditions just outside the university walls demands a certain sensitivity to the problems of writing about other cultures. Its companion volume, *Literacy, Colonialism and Oral Culture in Southern Africa* (Draper, 2003), describes oral appropriations of Christian texts that were first brought to the continent as a part of the colonial project. The complex and delicate power relations at work here have turned in this second volume into a straw man that is paradoxically its very theme, the so-called great divide between the oral and literate. To blur it, to find the oral trace in the text or vice versa, is to counter the spectre of ethnocentrism, whether in the superiority of one's literate sensibility or, in its obverse guise, the romanticisation of oral traditions. After all, one would rarely live in an exclusively oral or literate society, and this is especially the case in the old Mediterranean, where religions made up of a mixture of both competed with and for the Roman Empire.

The stakes of the great divide in antiquity are at least two-fold. One is the understanding of the religions that were incubated then, namely that troublesome triage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, if not the place of religion in consciousness itself. It is then surprising that theology is so little at work in these essays, with the exception of editor Jonathan Draper's considerations on the struggle over the place of the word of God in early Christianity, whether invisible or visible in script. Theology is, however, more often seconded to colonial history here, and to the place of oral cultures within this history. That the ancient Mediterranean was a site of both colonialism and changing regimes of literacy allows paradigms from the present to stretch back to an earlier

historical situation. When, for example, Judaism defines itself against the rise of the hegemony of the Roman Empire, it formalises itself in a reaction that produces its very religiosity. If Richard A. Horsley's account of hegemony and minority sounds familiar, it is because the ramifications of understanding these ancient religions trickle down to the politics of the present. Thus, in a response to Horsley, Rabbinic scholar Martin S. Jaffee argues that it was not so much the Romans as the rise of the Christian Empire that Judaism reacted against, creating its own sacred institutions and script, turning a case of identity politics into the transformation of an oral tradition.

Not all of the essays in *Orality, Literacy and Colonialism* are concerned with the topic of its title. The absence of a colonial context for the opening essay by specialist John Foley leaves its proposition for an 'oral poetry' impoverished by comparison with the detailed historical material to follow. Even if it is written, Foley argues, oral poetry betrays the structure of oral composition, so that texts such as the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* and the *Mahabharata* may be read with all the ambiguity of a poem. In literary theory, this attention to the ambiguity of the artwork, not to mention its canonical status, is reminiscent of an earlier stage of criticism, one which gave way to its own great division between poststructuralism and historicism. Here it leads to the position of the former, to a textualisation of orality, in a four-fold categorisation of its formations. From a situation of oral composition and oral reception to texts that are written by oral artists to be read by largely illiterate people (he gives the example of a man who learned to read at 12 years of age), his proposition for expanding the two-fold divide already shows the dangers of positivism, as Foley refers to the 'traditional songs of the Maori of Australia' (15). In wanting to not be one of those 'scholars who spend nearly every moment with book or pen or mouse in hand' (11), and in an attempt at 'portraying oral poetries on their own terms', Foley moves too far in the other direction in a generalisation that repeats the problems of the great divide itself (34).

If too rigid a definition of oral and literate cultures is Foley's target here, as it is for other authors in this volume, then the resistance that this division has created is itself worth thinking about. While the concept of oral culture falls too easily into the postcolonial bugbear of ethnocentrism, it has also opened doorways to thinking difference. The divide is a useful model for working out how cross-cultural misunderstandings take place in Northern Australia, for instance, where health care and adequate housing are at stake. Again, the third term of the title, colonialism, introduces not only the context but the significance of the theory. That this book largely focuses on the history surrounding the New Testament, and attempts to think through surviving texts about oral cultures that have long since become extinct, makes its task to do justice to such cultures all the more difficult. The tendency to want to erase the divide altogether may well be symptomatic of the impossibility of the task. Yet it also brings with it a sensitivity to the oral traces at work in the New Testament, insofar as this moment of writing a religion represents something of an erasure of the traditions that preceded it. The power of such textualisation is represented by Werner H. Kelber, as both the colonial rule of the Romans and the resistance of the Gospels become a site of ideological struggle, episodes of demonic possession turning into protests against colonial oppression and Babylon standing in for the wickedness of Rome. Horsley agrees that Jesus was part of a more general peasant resistance not only to Rome, but to the Jerusalem city-state. That the peasantry were illiterate leads him to argue against the idea that script was something sacred to them, instead reading the frequent appeals to the authority of writing in the Bible as allusions to oral traditions. In his account, the Gospels strengthened oral tradition rather than superseded it.

This rich collection addresses other debates too. Pieter J.J. Botha questions the methodology of what must stand as the biggest blow to the great divide, the research of Scribner and Cole that counters it not with history, but with an emphasis on the impact of schooling. Baudouin Decharneux describes how the Mithra cult acted as a colonial tool for the Romans. Jean-Luc Solere examines references to writing in Plato. The oral-literate divide, with its problematic extension to the ancient Mediterranean, does however remain the focus of many of the essays and motivates a substantial response from Claudia V. Camp. Her contribution, and the Rabbinic response from Jaffee, are among the most valuable in the book as they point to, first, the status of the essays amidst current scholarship on orality and literacy and, second, to the boundaries of a Christianised approach to the New Testament. If the liveliness of the disputes here are any indication as to the future of the divide in considering ancient texts, it would seem that this is a rich area for research. For this reader, this is especially so when it pertains to the embryonic formation of religiosity, as the implications of this largely scriptural form of consciousness play themselves out in both ancient and contemporary history.

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## REFERENCES

Draper, Jonathan, editor. 2003. *Literacy, Colonialism and Oral Culture in Southern Africa*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.