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Abstract and Keywords

This article is concerned with social-anthropological approaches to literacy and orality. It tries to determine the extent cultural studies of orality in other societies can throw light on ancient Jewish literacy, and explains how the studies of orality have contributed to the academic debate on the transmission of the Mishnah. It also assesses past studies on literacy and orality and presents some of the best ways to evaluate the available sources. The social contexts where writing and/or oral communication are used and the role of professional scribes are studied.

Keywords: social-anthropological approaches, literacy, orality, cultural studies, Mishnah, professional scribes

OUR understanding of the various aspects of orality and writing in Jewish daily life profits from the prolific outpouring of studies in related fields. Not only have works on literacy in the ancient world, the Graeco-Roman world in particular, contributed to our understanding of ancient Jewish literacy, but theoretical and cultural studies of orality in other societies and from other eras provide a sophisticated framework for addressing the roles of writing and orality amongst Jews in Roman Palestine, despite chronological and geographical differences. We will turn our attention to social-anthropological approaches to orality and literacy. To what extent can cultural studies of orality in other societies throw light on ancient Jewish literacy, and how have studies of orality in particular contributed to the scholarly debate on the transmission of the Mishnah? These interrelated matters must be addressed from various perspectives and disciplines. In what follows we will assess previous studies on the broad topic at hand, and consider the best ways in which the available sources should be evaluated. What were the social contexts in which writing and/or oral communication would be used? What was the role of professional scribes in daily life?

(p. 483) 1. Literacy in Graeco-Roman Society

The issue of literacy in ancient Graeco-Roman society has received much scholarly consideration and has been widely debated from the social-anthropological and historical perspectives, thus yielding diverging views on the extent of literacy in this era (see the summary in Hezser 2001: 18–26). The broad claim that literacy was the cause of Greek rational thought in particular has provoked a major debate among scholars. The publication of Goody and Watt's article, 'The Consequences of Literacy' (1963), which argues that writing in ancient Greece produced democracy, rational thought, philosophy, and historiography, first incited the controversy. Although the authors made it clear that literacy should not be envisioned as the only cause, their followers overlooked their warning. Moreover, even though Goody himself attempted to refine his own analysis, focusing on the implications of writing, in his later work he returned to the essential argument of the consequences of literacy, namely that writing was one of the major forces behind the development of logical, scientific thought, the establishment of a bureaucracy, law, and the modern state (Thomas 1992: 16–17).

In his major works, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (1982) and *The Muse Learns*

to Write (1986), Eric Havelock deals with the effects of the beginning of writing, and the consequences of alphabetic literacy on ancient Greek society. As the title of the first book mentioned above indicates, Havelock maintains that the 'democratized literacy' in ancient Greece was indeed a 'revolution', a view shared by the cultural anthropologist Jack Goody who, in his work *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (1986), considers the implications of writing on the organization of society and explores the interface between the oral and the written.

Whereas Goody, Havelock and others attempted to demonstrate the extensive, revolutionizing effects of writing, others have railed against their sweeping views. Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984) provides a corrective to their claims. Street argues that such analyses of the uses and consequences of literacy more often than not fail to theorize sufficiently for the purposes of cross-cultural comparison. It is frequently assumed that literacy is a neutral technology that can be detached from specific social contexts; the ideological factors bound up with it are ignored (Street 1984: 105). Instead, as Christopher Miller astutely suggests, we should not view literacy 'as a universal phenomenon with predetermined consequences; there are only literacies, each embedded in an ideological context from which it cannot be distinguished' (Goody et al. 1988: 227).

Grand theories such as those espoused by Goody and Havelock are also tempered by the lack of consideration for matters that provide more conjectural grounding, such as the question of the availability of writing materials, the quantity of written sources, and the extent of literacy among the various societal strata. (p. 484) Moreover, one must ask whether or not Havelock's adherence to a strict differentiation between 'pre-literate' and 'literate' society in ancient Greece withstands scrutiny.

Rosalind Thomas addresses this issue in her works *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (1989) and *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (1992), and observes that during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and later, orality was the primary mode of communication, despite the fact that evidence of a great deal of writing exists. Even in later Roman society, oral performance was greatly valued, alongside the production of written literary texts (Thomas 1992: 159). Finnegan also offers a serious critique of the view that orality and literacy are mutually exclusive. Rather than envisioning a rupture ('Great Divide') between two separate categories, she suggests the relationship of a continuum, or perhaps 'a complex set of continuums' (1992: 272).

These two scholars are certainly not alone in highlighting the complex, synergistic relationship between the written and oral. In discussing literacy in medieval Europe, Brian Stock emphasizes the interpenetration of orality and writing and its effect on thought processes. According to Stock, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries an important transformation took place in Europe: from that time onwards oral discourse functioned within a 'universe of communication governed by texts' (Stock 1983: 3). Together the two modes played a 'decisive role in the organization of experience' (ibid.). In other words, in the mid-twelfth century, when literate norms were established in judicial and governmental arenas, the spoken word continued to play a prominent cultural role (ibid. 9). Both written and oral modes of communication persisted throughout the medieval period. As literacy informed medieval life and thought, and texts were introduced into a largely oral society, modes of reading and writing were affected, and in turn a growing intellectualism emerged. The interplay between written and oral modes of communication was instrumental in enabling new ways of understanding the world as a series of relationships.

Finnegan also emphasizes this connection between oral and written modes of communication in her work. Interaction between oral and written forms is 'extremely common'. In fact, her examination of broadside ballads itself deals a 'death blow' to the idea that the use of writing puts an end to oral literary forms (Finnegan 1992: 160). In early sixteenth-century England, ballads were distributed in large numbers in a special form—the broadside. Ballad singers went around singing samples of their songs in order to sell broadside sheets. Hence, the initial distribution was a mixture of 'print and performance'. The ballads circulated orally even though they started as printed text. Finnegan calls to mind other parallels to this kind of interaction, such as popular Irish songs (ibid. 165). The underlying point in the transmission of oral poetry is the need to disabuse ourselves of romantic theories of the 'nature and purity of "oral transmission"' (160). As we (p. 485) shall see, this mixed and complex mode of textual distribution provides a template of sorts for understanding the transmission of the rabbinic 'Oral Torah' as well.

Whereas the previously mentioned works draw heavily on social-anthropological approaches to literacy, William Harris' monograph on Graeco-Roman literacy is a historical examination that challenges the notion that 'democratizing literacy' in ancient Greece created an unprecedented revolution (1989). Harris provides a less

optimistic view of the extent of literacy in antiquity, and demonstrates that it was a relatively rare phenomenon. He directs us to the many important issues to keep in mind when making assertions about such a complicated matter. For example, what do we mean by literacy? Obviously, we have to reckon with many different degrees of this skill in antiquity. Although Harris does not delve deeply into the notion of 'semi-literates', he underscores the need to take them into account. Furthermore, what were the functions and social contexts of writing in the ancient world?

Harris generally distinguishes between two types of literacy: scribal literacy and craftsman's literacy. The former was restricted to a particular social group which used writing for purposes such as record-keeping. This technical writing skill, also referred to by others as 'professional literacy', was predominant in Near Eastern cultures throughout antiquity, and in Europe until the twelfth century. The later term, craftsman's literacy, is used by Harris to refer to 'the condition in which the majority, or a near-majority, of skilled craftsmen are literate', a situation which prevailed in Europe and North America from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century (Harris 1989: 7–8).

Although he admits that attempts to derive a literacy rate are risky, Harris nonetheless sets out to do so. According to his estimate, the literacy rate for Attica in classical times amounted to 5–10 percent (ibid. 114). In Roman imperial times, literacy will have been higher in Rome than elsewhere in Italy (ibid. 259), but altogether below 15 percent, and even lower than that for women (ibid. 266–67). Altogether, on the basis of literary and epigraphic evidence, Harris compellingly argues that literacy did not exceed 10–15 percent of the population (women and slaves included) from the time of the invention of the Greek alphabet shortly before the eighth century BCE to the end of the Roman Empire.

This means that written culture in antiquity was by and large restricted to technical writers on the one hand, and a privileged minority on the other. Written culture by no means replaced oral culture, but rather coexisted with it. Harris acknowledges the profound effects of writing on ancient Greek and Roman societies. For one thing, writing enhanced class differences and served as an 'instrument of class hegemony' (334). Literacy on a large scale is the product of forces that were absent in antiquity. An expansive school system was lacking, as was the demand for a literate workforce. Whatever demand for such workers or secretaries existed at the time was filled for the most part by slaves. Finally, there was no underlying ideology (p. 486) that all citizens should be able to read or write. Under these circumstances, it should be no surprise that mass literacy was absent in antiquity.

Harris' work has not gone unnoticed, prompting scholars to re-evaluate and reformulate their views. Not everyone concurs entirely with his assessment of literacy in antiquity. This is exemplified by the volume of articles discussing Harris' work entitled *Literacy in the Roman World* (Beard, ed. 1991). While the contributors hardly challenge Harris' main point that literacy levels in Graeco-Roman antiquity were very low, they nonetheless examine aspects of his book from various vantage points, calling into question several of his assertions. For example, Mary Beard disagrees with Harris on the functions of writing in Roman pagan religion, for according to her assessment 'there was much more writing associated with the cults, rituals, and sanctuaries of Graeco-Roman paganism than Harris' argument implies' (Beard 1991: 37). Like Harris, she acknowledges that writing played a different role in early Christianity than it did in paganism, yet at the same time she contends that the contrast should not be framed in terms of 'marginality' and 'centrality'. Beard also emphasizes that writing was more than a utilitarian tool; it served 'to define experience, to change perceptions, to display dominance' (ibid. 58).

In 'Conquest by Book' in the same volume, Hopkins finds completely convincing Harris' main hypothesis that only a minority of adult males and a tiny minority of adult females could read and write in all periods of classical antiquity, but draws out the implications of Harris' minimalist case. If adult male literacy was about 10 percent across the Roman Empire, 'there were roughly 2 million adult males who *could* (emphasis in original) read and write to some extent in the empire as a whole. In world history, this was an unprecedented number of literates for a single state' (Hopkins 1991: 135). Hopkins sets out to demonstrate that the sheer mass of people who could read and write, living in Roman towns and in some villages, affected the experience of living in Roman society politically, economically, socially, and culturally. Hopkins does not argue for universal literacy; but despite the fact that a minority of Roman men could read and write, 'the mass of literates, the density of their communications and the volume of their stored knowledge, significantly affected living in the Roman empire. Literacy and writing were active ingredients in promoting cultural and ideological change'. (ibid. 144).

It is important to keep in mind that specific factors—economic, social, and cultural—affect the distribution of writing within a given society. Moreover, their effects vary according to a particular society. One can, however, detect

certain pre-conditions that give rise to the spread of literacy. The availability of public teachers and affordable education for everyone, and the accessibility of writing materials and texts, for example, would increase the spread of literacy. Although it is yet to be determined whether the extent of literacy in Graeco-Roman society was as significant as some have surmised, we nonetheless have a good idea of its function in daily life. We know, for example, that in the Roman world there were various forms of textual transmission, and that scribes were employed to perform (p. 487) multiple tasks. One of the biggest challenges scholars face when determining the usage of writing in any pre-modern period is the extent to which the preserved written material accurately reflects that use. Archaeological and geographical factors that determine the survival or absence of evidence must always be taken into account.

2. The Use of Writing Amongst Jews in Roman Palestine

In general, Jews in Roman Palestine engaged in various forms of writing from simple lists, documents, and inscriptions to sophisticated literary works (see the overview in Hezser 2001: 251–444). Sales and loan documents, marriage contracts, labels on jars, donors' and burial inscriptions, magical texts, letters, and literary documents all attest to the varied use of writing. These uses of writing, however, were quite circumscribed and limited to particular strata within society. As in Graeco-Roman society, it was mainly the educated members of the upper strata of society and the intellectual elite who used writing. Given the number of different languages used in Roman Palestine, with Greek being the official administrative language, Aramaic the everyday language of the Jewish population, and Hebrew the language of the Torah and the Temple (Schwartz 1995), the conditions for the spread of literacy must have been quite complicated.

We may assume that, just as amongst Greeks and Romans, writing skills would have been much less common than reading skills among Jews. Since Jewish education seems to have concentrated on Torah reading skills only (Hezser 2001: 68–89; see also Hezser's chapter on education in this volume), families would have had to employ private tutors to teach their children non-professional scribal skills. Indeed, 'education in literacy of any sort outside of professional scribal training remained socially confined to the private household, where it was managed by older family members or hired tutors' (Jaffee 2001: 22). Only the well-to-do were able to afford this luxury.

Writing would have been indispensable for administrative affairs. Those Jews who participated in the provincial administration of Roman Palestine and used writing for that purpose were probably quite assimilated and bilingual (Hezser 2001: 489–90). The upper echelons of society, business people and landowners, would have used written documents and letters, as did some rabbis and editors of rabbinic documents. We may assume, though, that except for occasional informal notes, professional scribes would have been used to actually write these letters, texts, and documents (Hezser 2001: 474–95). In Jewish, as in Graeco-Roman (p. 488) society, writing was not a required skill to manage ordinary everyday life tasks, and it also did not convey a higher status on the person who possessed it. Therefore, even some members of the upper strata of society and religious leaders were able to scribble their own names only (ibid. 169–89).

3. Professional Scribes

Ancient scribes' mundane duties consisted of secretarial and administrative tasks. They were record keepers of business and judicial matters, writers of documents, and guardians of archives. As such, they were necessary for the maintenance of a government's administrative activities. Even small city-states of the ancient Near East required the employment of scribes. In addition to government scribes, scribes were needed at the temples, and some scholars assume that a scribal school existed at the Temple in Jerusalem (Crenshaw 1998: 111–12). Scribes also copied manuscripts and literary works (Avrin 1991). Members of the upper strata of society employed scribes as their personal secretaries. Despite the many different functions of scribes, scribal activity was far from extensive in the ancient world. Scribes who were privately employed to copy Greek and Latin texts and who functioned as secretaries in the houses of the wealthy were usually slaves or freedpersons and not held in high esteem (Small 1997: 174 on scribes as 'research assistants').

Throughout the Mediterranean world of the first centuries CE, scribes would perform a range of functions and be found at various socio-economic levels. Yet, as Haines-Eitzen notes (2000: 8), despite their ubiquity, Roman-period scribes seldom received recognition for their work. Even nowadays, scribes are sometimes mentioned in passing

only, as in Reynolds and Wilson's book *Scribes and Scholars* (1974). Although scribes are mentioned in the title, nowhere in the book does one come across a sustained discussion of any aspect of who scribes were, what roles they performed, or what their function was in society. Similarly Fantham in a more recent work, *Roman Literary Culture* (1996), treats scribes cursorily, and further demonstrates the difficulty of discussing the social history of ancient scribes extensively given the paucity and nature of our sources. Although almost all ancient texts were written by scribes, little was written about them. The general anonymity of scribes is also evident in Jewish sources, which almost never mention the names of scribes who wrote letters for rabbis (but see y. Sanh. 1:2, 18d, where R. Gamliel and elders' dictation of a letter to Yohanan the scribe is mentioned). Nevertheless, the role of scribes in the biblical period (Bar Ilan 1988; Demsky/Bar Ilan 1988; Schniedewind 2004; Carr 2005; Van der Toorn 2007), and in the first (p. 489) centuries CE (Saldarini 2001; Goodman 1994) is relatively well researched by scholars.

We can with some certainty claim that from the time of the Persian restoration of the Jerusalem Temple in the fifth century BCE until the Second Temple's destruction in 70 CE, the Temple employed various types of scribes (Crenshaw 1998). As the cultic, political, and economic hub of the country, the Temple required the performance of numerous scribal tasks. Beyond the confines of the Temple, even highly literate Jews of the upper strata of society would sometimes employ scribes to write personal memoranda, and wealthy merchants employed (slave) secretaries to write sales documents and to maintain their business accounts.

Scribes were needed for a whole gamut of purposes, ranging from the labelling of items and the writing of sales and loan documents to transcribing complex literary texts. A literary composition was basically an oral endeavour whereby the author would dictate a composition to a scribe. Evidence of the work of professional scribes can be found among the Qumran finds: many different scribal hands worked on the manuscripts which were written in Palaeo-Hebrew, Hebrew square script and Greek (Martin 1958).

Except for the copying of biblical texts, for which the manuscripts found at Qumran provide evidence, no material remains of literary writing exists for the rabbinic period, that is, the first five centuries CE. All surviving manuscripts of rabbinic works can be dated to the post-rabbinic medieval period. We must note the distinction between the scribal ability to copy Torah scrolls and rabbis' creative interpretation and adaptation of Torah knowledge. While some rabbis may have been professional scribes, this was not a skill that pertained to all rabbis. Rabbinic literature attests to the notion that the copying of texts was considered a mere technical skill, from which rabbis distinguished their own more creative intellectual ability (see Hezser 1997: 467–75 on the relationship between rabbis and scribes).

According to Haines-Eitzen, Christian scribes were more involved in the copying of literary texts than was customary for scribes in the Graeco-Roman world (2000: 130–31). Copyists of early Christian texts not only duplicated the texts but also modified, corrected, and interpreted them, because the texts were religiously relevant to them. In other words, the producers of the copies were also the users of the texts. When copying texts in the midst of raging theological debates, they wielded a certain power over their formulation. Haines-Eitzen suggests that this Christian practice may have emerged out of a Jewish scribal context, that is, that Jewish scribes may have been similarly involved in the formulation of the biblical texts they copied, an assumption which requires further study.

(p. 490) 4. Letter Writing

According to Harris, letters were not a commonplace occurrence in the ancient world: their use was rather limited to certain social circles. They became more common amongst the political elite in the Hellenistic period, but even then they were usually 'inspired by some emergency' (Harris 1989: 127–28). In Roman imperial times, letter writing and the distribution of written decrees allowed the emperor to harness control over distant provinces. Members of the court and influential politicians would increasingly use written communication. Letters were also important for the dissemination of moral and theological instruction among Christians, already at the time of Paul, but especially in the fourth and fifth centuries, when church leaders became prolific letter writers (Stowers 1989; Doty 1973).

We have evidence of ancient Jewish letter-writing practices from papyrus documents and references to letters in the works of Josephus and rabbinic documents (Hezser 2001: 259–90). As in Roman society, letters were primarily used as a means of communication among politicians (the Herodian dynasty), military leaders (Josephus and other rebel leaders of the first revolt against Rome), and religious authorities (rabbis). Especially in amoraic times, rabbis

seem to have used letters for the purpose of exchanging halakhic views. Letters were usually dictated to a scribe; the sender merely added his or her signature if he or she was able to do so. On the basis of literary references to letters we do not know whether members of the Herodian family, military leaders, and rabbis wrote their letters themselves or whether they had scribes available to write the letters for them.

5. Late Antique Developments in the Use of Writing

In amoraic times, that is, from the third century CE onwards, we can detect a general expansion of the Jewish uses of writing, which may be attributed to increased urbanization and to the Roman-Byzantine influence (Hezser 2001: 500–1). Nevertheless, these ‘pockets’ of writing amongst clearly defined social strata must be understood against the background of the continued and all-pervasive use of orality as the chief means of communication throughout the period under discussion here.

During the first three centuries of Roman rule, writing seems to have been rather limited in Palestinian Jewish society. Some private citizens would have occasionally (p. 491) employed writing for pragmatic purposes—occasional letter-writing, accounts, and notes. Graffiti inscriptions on ossuaries from Herodian-period Jerusalem identified the remains of members of wealthy families, whereas burial inscriptions from the third century onwards were more formal and elaborate, indicating the status of the deceased (Hezser 2001: 364–97). Synagogue dedication inscriptions also belong to that later period (ibid. 397–413). In addition, rabbinic traditions were collected and edited in late antiquity and material evidence of magic writing exists for that time (ibid. 436–44).

As Hezser has observed, there is no evidence that ancient Jews considered illiteracy degrading (2001: 176–89). While upper-class Roman males were expected to possess at least rudimentary reading and writing skills, this seems not to have been the case in Jewish society. But even in Roman society, writing continued to be primarily regarded as a technical skill associated with low-status scribes, ‘whereas only the truly educated *litteratus* had a high status’ (ibid. 499). In both Jewish and Roman society, parental heritage and land-ownership were the prevailing status criteria, and at least in Roman society public offices as well. Furthermore, what mattered to the rabbis was not the mere skill of writing but the intellectually much more demanding ability to develop Torah creatively and to apply it to new situations. Rabbis’ propagation of the value of Torah study may have convinced some of their contemporaries to acquire Hebrew reading skills, but we do not know to what extent rabbis actually succeeded in influencing the Jewish populace in this regard.

6. Women and Literacy

Recently, scholars have concerned themselves with the question of women’s literacy in antiquity. Harris’ study has demonstrated that in societies in which illiteracy is widespread—this is especially the case in traditional societies—a higher proportion of women than men are usually illiterate (Harris 1989: 23). Women who managed their households would also educate their daughters. In wealthy, upper-class Roman households this education may have included instruction in financial affairs, which would have required calculating, and perhaps also some reading and writing skills. A few Greek and Roman women became intellectuals, but this level of higher education must be considered very exceptional. According to Harris, ‘Funerary reliefs demonstrate, and some Pompeian portraits of women confirm, that some literary education was thought to be desirable for a woman of good family’ (ibid. 252). In general, though, literacy was rather restricted amongst women. As the Babatha and Salome Komaise papyri indicate, (p. 492) even Jewish women from affluent landowning families who managed their own property lacked basic literary skills and were not even able to sign their own names (Hezser 2001: 314–15, 487). This is not surprising since even upper-class males were not necessarily literate, as we have seen.

7. Social-Anthropological Approaches to Orality

Milman Parry (1987) and his assistant, Albert Lord (2000) laid the foundational work in orality studies for generations to come. As one of the leading scholars of the Homeric epic tradition, Parry endeavoured to prove the oral character of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. By studying the actual living tradition of epic song-making in Yugoslavia, he set out to trace the development of Homeric poetry and to provide a rational and scientific analysis of the mechanisms and aesthetics of oral poetry. This approach distinguished him from earlier classicists.

Occupying his attention was the question of how the poet(s) of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were able to compose these lengthy epic tales. Until then, Homeric scholars were divided into two camps: the 'unitarians' posited a single author, whereas the 'separatists' maintained that the poems were composite constructions of different strata. Parry turned his energy to resolving this issue. It was a daunting dilemma, given that the poems were composed in Greece two and a half millennia ago or even earlier, at a time when most of the population was illiterate.

Parry was struck by the repetitive phrases strewn throughout the 15,000 lines of the *Iliad* and the 12,000 lines of the *Odyssey*, and he came up with an explanation for their appearance. The basic thrust of Parry's thesis is that the epic poems were originally produced orally. According to the Parry-Lord theory, formulaic epithets such as 'glorious Hector' and 'swift-footed Achilles' play a significant role in the poems' composition. The poet seems to have constructed a line of poetry by combining epithets with formulaic phrases in the process of oral performance.

Other scholars had observed the formulaic phrases too, but Parry went a step further by arguing that the poet composed the poems orally. They were songs produced *in performance*. By delving into a vast storehouse of stock phrases and traditional themes, the poet tailored the material to create a personal composition. Unfortunately Parry died in 1935 at the young age of 33, but his assistant Albert Lord made it his life's ambition to complete his mentor's work, which he succeeded in accomplishing. In his work, *The Singer of Tales* (2000), a classic for the general study of oral and written literature and a standard textbook within folklore studies, he elaborated Parry's work. The Parry-Lord theory not only greatly influenced (p. 493) Homeric Studies, but also textual studies in general from the Hebrew Bible to *Beowulf*, medieval epic poetry, Gaelic poetry and most recently, as we shall see, Mishnaic Studies. Even sceptics of the theory must now contend with it.

What did Parry and Lord learn from the Yugoslav poets? Well, to begin with, these poets crafted their art without knowledge of the written word. They were unable to read or write, which means that there was no fixed text, no cherished archetype, and hence not one correct original version. The performer is the author of the epic poem. That said, he is not creating *ex nihilo*, but rather he is tailoring formulae, patterns, and themes to which authors of the past contributed. They provided the material for the unique performance, and in this sense each epic can be considered the product of several authors. This theory makes it difficult to argue that the only way to explain lengthy oral poems is in terms of memorization, and it puts to rest the search for the one correct and original version of the text.

In her book *Oral Poetry* (1992) Finnegan raises the question whether and to what extent a formulaic style is proof of oral composition. If theorists concede that the use of formulaic expressions is an earmark of both oral and written composition, then how widely can one apply the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition (ibid. 69)? Finnegan also points to another difficulty in the general application of this theory, namely the exact definition of a 'formula' (ibid. 71). Formulae by definition are repetitions, but analysts disagree as to whether the repetitions are metrical, syntactic, or semantic. Scholars differ over the use of the term 'formula' and therefore develop different statistical analyses for the purpose of demonstrating whether or not a style is 'oral-formulaic'. These concerns aside, the Lord-Parry theory and its advocates have yielded important insights into oral literature, and the impact of their work is felt in many areas of study. Given that the Homeric epics provided the textual base for Lord's study, *The Singer of Tales*, it is no surprise that this work has left a lasting imprint on Classical Studies. More recently, orality theories have been applied to the study of the development of the Hebrew Bible (Niditch 1996).

8. The Interplay between Orality and Literacy in Rabbinic Transmission

The question of when and how the rabbinic tradition, which rabbis called the 'Oral Torah' in distinction to the 'Written Torah' of the Hebrew Bible, was put into written form has preoccupied scholars for at least two centuries. The difficulty in part also rests in the fact that rabbinic documents such as the Mishnah do (p. 494) not provide clear evidence of their own genesis or that of other rabbinic works. Furthermore, although the rabbinic sources themselves state that the Oral Law must not be written down, there is evidence that rabbis did possess some traditions in written form. Queries such as the following abound: what was the nature of the material available to the editors of these documents? To what extent did they 'invent' the contents of their discussions, and to what extent were they transmitted to them orally or in written form? Did the editors preserve traditions verbatim or did they shape them according to their needs or desires? Was the editorial process complex and multi-layered, drawn out over a long span of time, or does it reflect the workings of an editor or a circle of editors at a particular period of

time? To answer these questions contemporary scholars have steered away from using suspect rabbinic references and have instead focused on the form and content of the rabbinic document itself.

There are two basic camps of thought on the issue of the Mishnah's transmission and development. Scholars such as Lieberman (1950), Gerhardsson (1998), and Zlotnick (1988) argue for an oral transmission of the Mishnah until the production of early medieval manuscripts and others, such as Epstein (1964) and Safrai (1987) assert that from the outset rabbinic compilations were produced as written texts (see Hezser 2002 for a discussion of these theories).

Neusner posits a different approach, one that views the redaction of the Mishnah not as a preservation of tradition, but rather as a creative, purposeful adaptation. He envisions a more singular process of transmission, not based on accurate oral transmission of tradition. The sustained character of transmission is reflected, according to Neusner, in the 'unified and cogent formal character of the Mishnah'. Upon close reading of the 'document', it 'proves systematic and orderly, purposive and well composed' (Neusner 1987: 136). The Mishnah accordingly is the work of tradent-redactors who deliberately formulated traditions.

Modifying and building on Lieberman's work, Hezser suggests that the creation, distribution, and usage of books in Graeco-Roman antiquity is the most suitable context for understanding the development of the Mishnah (Hezser 2002: 167). Jaffee also, cognizant of the need to explore the Graeco-Roman milieu, points to the Graeco-Roman parallels in rhetorical education for the purpose of understanding the ideology of Oral Torah as it developed in the third and fourth century CE within Galilean rabbinic discipleship circles. Moreover, his work unhinges the assumed dichotomy underlying the work of previous scholars, and depicts a process of interpenetration whereby 'traditions were shaped and revised in a continuous circuit of oral performance and written recension—a circuit impossible to break artificially into an "oral substratum" and a "written recension" or vice versa' (Jaffee 2001: 101).

Jaffee's groundbreaking work, *Torah in the Mouth* (2001), provides a corrective to studies of rabbinic literature that erroneously view the transition from oral tradition to written text in evolutionary terms—from oral to written form. His (p. 495) compelling thesis explains the existence of diverse versions of tannaitic teachings, not as mistakes that arise from a purely oral transmission process, but rather as multiple versions that reflect diverse oral performances of a tradition in diverse contexts, especially since in Graeco-Roman rhetorical culture, memorization of a written text led to a variety of versions in various settings. In examining several readings of mishnaic texts, Jaffee highlights how the material as scripted performance is in some ways analogous to a dramatic or musical presentation. Like the broadside ballads which Finnegan examined, the texts are activated, that is, they come to life, in the performance or recitation itself. In point of fact, their existence assumes the act of performance, and in turn the act of performance assumes the existence of the texts.

We also find the notion of the rabbinic oral-literary culture as a circulatory system of performative textuality in Fraade's early work on the tannaitic Midrash *Sifre Deuteronomy*, where he writes that Oral Torah in written form is 'the literary face of an otherwise oral circulatory system of study and teaching' (1991: 19). He applies this notion not only to the Mishnah but also to the early midrashic literature, which is an appropriate place to examine the 'complex interplay of oral and textual registers of tradition and its transmission' (ibid. 33). After all, it is in midrashic collections that we first encounter expressions of the dual Torah, and moreover, the very structure and rhetoric of midrashic commentary reflects the interplay of orality and writing. Expanding on and refining Lieberman's argument, Fraade presents a 'more "circulatory" understanding of the interrelation of Rabbinic texts and their oral performative enactments: an orality that is grounded in a textuality that remains orally fluid' (ibid. 36).

Drawing on Fraade's, and especially Jaffee's, insights and application of orality studies to rabbinic texts, Alexander illustrates that the transmission of mishnaic traditions involved more than the conveyance of textual material, namely, the 'crafting of their authority' and 'the cultivation of intellectual habits through which to analyze and interpret them' (Alexander 2006: 8). Like Jaffee, she argues that we should steer away from the model of envisioning texts as stable and fixed, whereby variations are deviations from an original. Instead, we should adopt the model that underscores the important role the performer plays in bringing the text to life. She shows how 'traditions could be constructed anew in different performative settings' (ibid. 74). Central to her thesis is the notion that the transmitters of the Mishnah were not passive conveyors of tradition but its very shapers, and the very process of transmission required analytical engagement with the material at hand.

(p. 496) 9. Future Directions

The study of orality and writing in Roman Palestine is a subject that encompasses many fields of study and disciplines. Not only literary, but also epigraphic, papyrological and numismatic evidence has to be taken into account. Many different factors will have determined the choice of written or oral modes of communication, amongst them geographical location, population distribution, social stratification, and religious values. All studies of ancient literacy and writing must be situated within the appropriate historical, political, social, and economic contexts of the respective societies under investigation. Comparative studies of orality and literacy in Jewish, Graeco-Roman, and early Christian society can reveal both parallels and discrepancies.

In the past, Graeco-Roman culture has served as the proper framework and background for understanding orality and writing amongst Jews in Roman Palestine. If we want to expand our perspective on Jewish orality and writing, we should also take the Islamic period into consideration and examine how early Muslim culture helped to transform a predominantly oral Jewish society into a 'religion of the book' (Beit-Arie 2000). The Cairo Geniza documents can provide the proper basis for a study of Jewish writing practices in medieval daily life (Goitein 1967–93; 1973). On that basis, broader issues can be examined as well: how did early Islamic writing practices influence the Jewish use of writing? What were the effects of the centralization and organization of the Jewish community under Islam on literacy, the distribution of texts, and the control exerted by religious authorities? By taking a chronologically wider view of the development of writing in Judaism, we can avoid transposing phenomena of a later period onto an earlier era.

Finally, if we assume that at least 90 percent of the Jewish population of Roman Palestine was illiterate or barely literate, we must reconsider our understanding of ancient Judaism as a 'book religion' (Hezser 2001: 503–4). Other elements, such as the oral and visual performances of the synagogues and theatres, and the visual imagery of mosaics, wall paintings, statues, and architectural features may have been more significant in ancient Judaism than the philologically oriented scholars of the past have tended to assume.

(p. 497) Suggested Reading

Hezser (2001) constitutes the most comprehensive work on the subject of Jewish literacy in Roman Palestine, thoroughly investigating the various types of evidence from a social-historical point of view. Harris' work, *Ancient Literacy* (1989), provides the proper background on literacy in Graeco-Roman society with his claim that the level of literacy was always very low. Jaffee's study, *Torah in the Mouth* (2001), is of fundamental importance for the relationship between orality and literacy in rabbinic culture. Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Poetry* (1992) is an excellent resource for understanding the relationship between written texts and oral performance.

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