

Exploring *The Lost World of Scripture*: A Critical Review

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ABSTRACT

In this review article I engage with the various hypotheses, ideas and arguments set forth in the book by John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy entitled *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority*.¹ This book discusses the key concept of biblical authority in relation to the realities of ancient oral and scribal culture and how a variety of circumstantial factors may have influenced the composition and transmission of the set of canonical books that are regarded as “inspired Scripture” by many Christians today. While finding much that I value and would affirm in this significant study, there are a number of conceptions and assertions that I question or disagree with. After pointing out such areas of dispute, I propose the reasons for my challenges and offer alternative interpretations of the scriptural texts and extra-biblical data that is available to us.

The Lost World of Scripture is a timely, thought-provoking, and very scholarly study that explores the crucial interface between the prominent oral-scribal cultures of the Ancient Near East and the composition of Scripture, with special reference to the subject of biblical reliability and authority. The book begins with a Preface and an Introduction; it ends with three helpful indices—of names, subjects, and scripture texts referenced. In between, the major exposition, argumentation, and exemplification of the authors’ thesis is presented in the form of 21 “propositions,” that is, “succinct statements of what each chapter seeks to accomplish” (10; *all page references are to the book under review unless stated otherwise*). The 21 sequentially developed propositions are organized into four major groupings: “The Old Testament World of Composition and Communication” (1-4); “The New Testament World of Composition and Communication” (5-13); “The Biblical World of Literary Genres” (14-17); and “Concluding Affirmations on the Origin and Authority of Scripture” (18-21). Parts one and two each end with a concluding section “Stepping Back and Summing Up,” while the book as a whole ends with

¹ Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013; 320 pages, paperback, \$12.50. Walton and Sandy are professors at Wheaton College in the Old Testament and New Testament respectively, and both have authored a number of books in their academic fields from a broadly Evangelical perspective. This book was awarded the “2014 Readers’ Choice Awards Honorable Mention” and “*Preaching’s* Preacher’s Guide to the Best Reference for 2014 (Hermeneutics).”

“Faithful Conclusions for Virtuous Readers.”² Walton is primarily responsible for chapters that focus on the Old Testament, while Sandy developed the material on issues relating to the New Testament. The authors seek to engage with a broad audience of university-seminary students and teachers, especially those who “have a high view of Scripture... [and] hold to inerrancy” (10).³ However, the book is “not an apologetic defense of biblical authority,” but was written to “clarify how best to understand the Bible” and to “help insiders be better prepared to interact with outsiders” (10).

The “lost world” of the book’s title has reference to what the authors view as “a lost culture that had a significant effect on how the Bible was written” (9)—namely, an oral and scribal milieu that was much different from the print-oriented and digital culture of today. Their aim is thus to reveal how this great cultural disparity influences our current understanding of “how both the Old and New Testaments were spoken, written, and passed on, especially with an eye to possible implications for the Bible’s inspiration and authority,” with special reference to possible “misappropriation of the term *inerrancy*” (9). With respect to its composition and transmission, the authors feel that “there’s a considerable ‘lostness’ in [understanding?] how the Bible came into being,” which leads to their central assertion: “Much of what was eventually written was first revealed in oral forms” (13). Key issues of debate then concern the term “eventually”—that is, how long a period is envisioned, and what was happening with the text in-between its initial oral expression and subsequent scribal recording? “For example, we find God speaking to Jeremiah for twenty-three years, and after all those years and sermons only then telling him to write out what he had been preaching” (13; cf. 152). This apparently refers to Jeremiah 36:2, where the LORD commands the prophet to write down all his prophecies concerning Judah and the nations, a directive that Jeremiah immediately carried out via dictation to his scribe, Baruch (36:4). However, this passage could also be interpreted as referring to the composition of some sort of a comprehensive or cumulative document consisting of various intermediately produced texts, not necessarily all of which were oral. In fact, the non-chronological ordering of the prophecies of the book of Jeremiah might even suggest that many of the constituent units were existing texts that had already been written down, either by Baruch or by the prophet-priest himself, who was certainly literate (cf. 29:1, 30:2).⁴

The preceding example simply illustrates that certain aspects of the data or evidence provided by Walton and Sandy (W&S) may be open to another interpretation, one that offers a somewhat different perspective on the activities of composing, saving (whether by memory and/or in

² The seemingly strange reference to “virtuous readers” depends on the discussion of this expression under proposition 21 (287).

³ The present reviewer would also consider himself to be a member of this primary audience. Although the authors affirm “the summary of the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” the progressively expounded argument of their book seems to deconstruct point 4 of this Statement: “Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and *about its own literary origins*, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives” (14; emphasis added).

⁴ Reference to a contemporary prophetic word (about Babylon) that was apparently *written* down *prior* to its oral proclamation is found in Jeremiah 51:60; here, the written form is emphasized by its destruction (v. 63). Another OT example suggesting that texts were available in written form considerably earlier than the time frame envisioned by W&S is Joshua 23:6, which already less than a generation after the death of Moses refers to “all that is written in the book of the Law of Moses” (cf. Job 19:23).

writing), and transmitting the various texts of Old and New Testament Scripture. *The Lost World of Scripture* is certainly a thoroughly researched, well-written, very informative study, and it indeed offers many important insights regarding the crucial relationships that existed between culture and communication in the Ancient Near Eastern World and hence also the process of biblical text formation. However, I occasionally found myself wondering whether the arguments being presented were the only way in which the available evidence could be understood and applied to the interrelated notions of inspiration, inerrancy, and authority as these pertain to the constituent words of Scripture. In the following overview of the book, therefore, I have chosen not simply to reflect upon the many significant points that arise from Walton and Sandy's 21 propositions, each of which are cited. Readers are encouraged to glean this valuable information for themselves by reading the book in its entirety (*it is inexpensively priced*). Rather, I will focus my discussion on some of the principal areas where I disagree with or question their stated interpretation,⁵ at the same time offering an alternative perspective for consideration.

P(roposition) 1: “*Ancient Near Eastern Societies Were Hearing Dominant and Had Nothing Comparable to Authors and Books as We Know Them*” (17, original italics). The preeminence of oral-aural communication within ancient cultures is a fundamental observation, and its implications are well-documented throughout the rest of the book. One wonders, however, whether a misleading implication might be conveyed by such a blanket statement—namely, that the notion of “authorship” was completely missing in these oral-oriented societies.⁶ Certainly, the possibility of a person sitting down in his study to write a “book” (on whatever substance available) was unknown, but were there no oral text “composers” in those days—orators, rhetors, call them what you will? Texts, long or short, formal or informal, were typically articulated aloud even while they were being written down, either by oneself or using a scribe, in more—or less—finished form. So could such text producers not be referred to as “authors” despite the fact that they were not composing a full-length “book”? This issue of what constitutes authorship recurs a number of times throughout *The Lost World of Scripture*, especially in connection with the “books” of the Old Testament, for example, with reference to “Moses” (33). In this “world of hearing dominance” (19), it is further alleged that “orality and *textuality* compete with each other as different modes of authority” (20, original emphasis). But was it always, or even at any time, a matter of “competition”—could there not also be some measure, at least, of *complementation*, for example, during the early stages of a given scripture text’s formation and in relation to its “authority”? A similar categorical assertion claims that “Authority was not connected to a document but to the person of authority behind the document when that person was known, or to the tradition itself” (27). But again, is it not more a matter of *both-and* rather than *either-or*, that the written document complements the authority of its author and vice-versa, certainly in the case of Scripture? As Walton himself observes, along with “the frequent references to the words

⁵ In view of space and in consideration of the reader’s patience, I have endeavored to focus on only the most substantive issues of concern, or which raise questions regarding the possibility of interpretive scenarios. A number of these same matters occur elsewhere in the book, but I have tried to avoid being too repetitious in the discussion. Unfortunately, this procedure may suggest that I am overly critical of *Lost World*, so I encourage all readers of this review to carefully work through the book, comparing what you find there, in context, with my critique, and make an informed decision based on the evidence presented plus your own research into these matters.

⁶ Cf. also: “In this world there were no authors or books” (30). While I might agree regarding the term “books” (as commonly understood in a contemporary sense), again I would dispute the assertion that there were “no authors” (i.e., composers of written literature) in antiquity.

being spoken and to people hearing...we should not minimize or dismiss the statements in the Bible about written documents and the role they played” (24). In fact, I would suggest that from the viewpoint of sacred Scripture (lit. ‘a writing’), there was not a great deal of difference: what was *spoken* (under God’s direction) for our instruction and edification was intended to be *written*—what now stands *written* was originally *spoken* (cf. Psalm 45:1).

P 2: “*Expansions and Revisions Were Possible as Documents Were Copied Generation After Generation and Eventually Compiled into Literary Works*” (30). As a general statement, this proposition may be acceptable, but it will inevitably lead to disagreement with respect to the *nature* and *degree* of these “expansions and revisions,”—that is, whether one happens to be a maximalist or a minimalist on this issue (I belong to the latter group). As noted above, the temporal adverb “eventually” is also problematic: how long of a time period is envisioned? Walton appears to have a greater gap in mind than I think is warranted: “...it is important for us to try to understand the transition from an oral tradition to a written tradition... Which version of an oral tradition found its way into a document?” (31).⁷ Of course, the biblical tradition did not find its own way into a document—someone or some group must have overseen or superintended the process. Who might that have been? Walton’s answer is not very reassuring to those who value the stability and associated reliability of the biblical text in question: “Communities would make such decisions, whether scribal or popular, sometimes perhaps formally, more often following a stream of tradition” (31).⁸ Furthermore, throughout the book, this possible twofold option with respect to composition does not seem to be seriously considered: The original oral “source text,” for example, one later incorporated into the Pentateuch, was more literarily complete (and verbally closer to what we have now) than many contemporary scholars allow for—and it was inscribed sooner rather than later, that is, not transmitted solely in the form of oral tradition and accordingly “community-governed” for as long as they suppose.⁹

But not only was the current religious community involved in the text-transmission process, more important were the actual scribes commissioned with the task of preserving, re-copying, and updating the texts of Scripture. Here is where even more uncertainly enters the picture (34):

One could say that it is possible in theory that certain phrases or whole sections of a biblical book may be the result of later scribal activity... It would have been activity that was approved by the community...

⁷ Time becomes a problem even in the case of an oral text that has been written down: “Time goes on; the tradition continues to be preserved orally while the document sits in an archive or library” (31). But which text is authoritative—the written one or that based on oral tradition? And how closely would these two traditions correspond after time passes? Which one would lead to variations sooner?

⁸ Thus in the case of a revision, “It would be appropriate to bring the new document into line with the current form of the oral tradition” (31). I would have reversed this priority: The *written* text would be consulted periodically to bring the divergent *oral* tradition back into line with what had been written, except for minor linguistic revisions and referential updates, such as in the case of proper names or historical references.

⁹ This matter pertains also to the issue of the development of Hebrew as a written language, whether sooner or later in time. “Some would place its roots as early as the beginning of alphabetic script around the sixteenth century, while others would put it as late as the twelfth or eleventh centuries. We don’t have to solve this for our discussion here” (32). But a half millennium difference in dates is quite significant, and it clearly does pertain to the determination at hand—that is, how early or late the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures might have been textualized. I would therefore argue for the earlier date.

They were not tampering with authority, because authority continued to reside in the authority figure who inaugurated the tradition and in the tradition that had been transmitted by the tradents in the community.¹⁰ Admittedly, one cannot be dogmatic about the composition and transmission of certain OT books, but I prefer to view this as a more controlled procedure and limited in the scope of active, text-altering participation. One alternative scenario might be this: Under divine direction and guidance, a much smaller, priestly or Levitical scribal group closely connected with the Tabernacle or Temple would have been appointed to be responsible for the safe-keeping of Israel's sacred scrolls. These "Keepers of the Sacred Traditions" (to give them a name) would have initially been associated either with a given text's prophetic source ("author") or, later on in the nation's history, its authorized compiler(s) in the case of a clearly "composite" document, one that was comprised of several distinct, authoritative constituent texts (like Samuel, Chronicles, Proverbs, or the Psalms).¹¹

A final problem with Walton's perspective on the scribal "expansions and revisions" of Scripture (30), concerns the initial character of Hebrew texts when they were first composed. This position needs to be considered in somewhat more detail:¹²

Those oral traditions would be recorded in documents (whether soon after they were spoken or sometime later),¹³ which would be stored in archives or libraries. In the third stage, and on an ongoing basis, the documents would be periodically recopied by scribes, often updated and sometimes revised or supplemented. As society became more text focused, the documents (perhaps further augmented by oral traditions) would begin to be compiled into literary works. These literary works themselves took on the authority derived from the traditions and the figures whose words they incorporated. The literary works sometimes underwent further modification and combination until they achieved the form that became frozen as canon (38).

How does such a seemingly long drawn out process of textual composition and transmission concern "biblical authority" (cf. the book's title)? While I do not deny that divine oversight might have operated in this manner, I think that it does introduce more uncertainty and imprecision into the process than necessary. A more viable option would be to assert that the various texts, whether as portions or in the whole, that were eventually recognized as inspired Scripture were composed more nearly as complete, well-formed "literary" works to begin with by Spirit-motivated individual author-compilers. Excellent literature, which I, along with the

¹⁰ When considering the question, "Did Scribes Expand on Texts?" (36), Walton includes "more controversial activity...supplementation: new laws, new wisdom sayings, new narratives, new oracles added to an existing compilation" (37). I would be very hesitant about allowing for such anonymous, open-ended scribal composition of Scripture. In this connection, the work of Karel van der Toorn is referenced, with apparent approval (*Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007]). For a critique of his liberal perspective, see E. Wendland, *Orality and Scripture: Composition, Translation, and Transmission* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2013), 84-87.

¹¹ A passage such as Deut. 17:18-19 gives an early (prophetic) indication of how this institution of textual preservation and oversight was envisaged: "The [future, obviously literate!] king is to transcribe a personal copy of this [Deuteronomic, covenantal] law, preserved under the guardianship of the Levitical priests" (J. L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* [San Francisco: Harper/SBL, 1988], p. 225).

¹² The summary below is followed by this footnoted disclaimer: "We really have no idea how and when or in what way the literary texts interacted with the oral texts" (38). My proposed alternative scenario is no more certain in terms of documentable evidence, but it does seem to include a stronger hypothetical element of textual control by a faithful succession of priestly-scribal overseers (like Ezra) that would allow for a process resulting in the eventual proto-Masoretic tradition.

¹³ Clearly not enough attention is afforded the former option in this book—the immediate scribal recording of the sacred texts of Scripture—the Old Testament and New Testament alike.

authors, consider the Scriptures to be (12),¹⁴ is generally not created by committee or in piecemeal fashion, and I do not think that this was what happened, by and large, in the case of the canonical documents that we have, by God's grace, received and do respect as "authoritative" in all matters that pertain to faith and life.¹⁵

P 3: "*Effective Communication Must Accommodate to the Culture and Nature of the Audience*" (39). In other words, to be effective, "every act of communication requires accommodation that will tailor the communication to the needs and circumstances of the audience" (39). In this day and age of rampant *miscommunication*, whether deliberate or unintended, it may be necessary to make the corollary for Christian communicators explicit: Any and all acts of "accommodation" must not distort, limit, or go beyond the content and intent of the authoritative Word of God—no matter how much pagan (including modern developments such as secular humanistic) pressure to the contrary is being overtly or covertly exerted by local cultural beliefs, values, norms, or practices. In an effort then to redefine (or rehabilitate) such concepts as "inerrancy" and "infallibility," Walton and Sandy turn to "speech-act theory," which "recognizes that communication is an action with particular intentions" that link an author with an "implied audience" (41):

The communicator uses *locutions* (words, sentences, rhetorical structures, genres) to embody an *illocution* (the intention to do something with those locutions—bless, promise, instruct, assert) with a *perlocution* that anticipates a certain response from the audience (obedience, trust, belief) (41).¹⁶

W&S thus perceive "divine accommodation in locutions" (42) and "inerrancy and authority" in illocution" (44)—that is, with reference to the texts of Scripture. "Since his locutionary framework is grounded in his language and culture, it is important to differentiate between what the communicator [of Scripture] can be inferred to believe and his illocutionary focus" (46), that is, the intended truth or outcome of the communication and the contextually-conditioned cultural expression of that intention:

So, for example, it is no surprise that ancient Israel believed in a solid sky, and God accommodated his locution to that model in his communication to them. But since the illocution is not to assert the true shape of cosmic geography, we can safely set those details aside as incidental without jeopardizing authority or inerrancy. Such cosmic geography is in the belief set of the communicators but is employed in their locutions; it is not the content of their illocutions (46).

I believe, however, that the notion of "meaning" is a complex comprised of *form* with *content* (the locution) and *function* (the illocution together with the perlocutionary intention) of an act of communication (whether of speech or writing). To attempt to differentiate these elements and attach divine authority only to the illocution (43) will lead, I think, to a great deal of hermeneutical confusion and debate. Why can divine inspiration and associated authority not be connected with the entire "meaning package," that is, with the locution (speech form + content)

¹⁴ "We can be glad that the Bible is some of the best literature—if not the very best literature—ever written in the history of the human race" (128). I agree, but, divine inspiration aside, disagree on *how* and *when* it got to be that way—whether earlier (authorial-initiator) or later (scribal-editorial) in the overall compositional process.

¹⁵ See Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

¹⁶ The "perlocution" could also be defined as "what speakers [actually] *do to hearers* by saying something, that is, the responses speakers evoke from hearers" (Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], p. 33, original italics). In their definition, W&S are referring to the "perlocutionary intention," which is "the author's intended response for readers" or hearers (Brown 2006:48).

being contextually interpreted from the unique perspective of the cultural framework and world-view of the biblical “author” (communicator-composer-compiler) and his ancient audience?

Thus, certain cultural aspects of the biblical text, such as the sun moving across the sky or references to the “waters above” (46; cf. 57), which appear to contradict the principles of modern science are not “errors” per se, but simply verbal vehicles for conveying the events and facts, as well as the aims and truths of Scripture within a specific historical-cultural frame of reference. These expressive details serve to affirm the conceptual authenticity and reliability of the biblical text and hence its authority as well. Of course, ANE comparative cultural studies coupled with modern linguistic and literary methodologies, such as speech-act theory, can assist us in the multifaceted task of interpretation, but they should not be employed in an effort to separate one strand of the textual meaning composite from another in order to designate that as the sole bearer, as it were, of divine authority and significance.¹⁷ Certainly, cultural-specific aspects of the locutions of Scripture need to be distinguished and construed appropriately with the assistance of a modern cognitive-semantic methodology, but I do not feel that this thorough exegetical process affects either our understanding or our application of such concepts as divine inspiration, inerrancy, or authority.

P 4: “*The Bible Contains No New Revelation About the Workings and Understanding of the Material World*” (49). This proposition would seem to be self-understood, but Walton’s discussion did raise a few questions. He refers to “Old World Science” as “a typical way of thinking in the ancient world” (50) and claims that from such a perspective “the physiology of nearly all the bodily systems was largely misunderstood” (51). But one wonders whether this blanket assertion violates a later proposition concerning literary genre categorization (14), which directs us to investigate biblical texts with respect to “the form of their employed genres and the nature of their rhetorical devices—so that we do not mistake them for something they never were” (200).

The Bible is obviously not a textbook on physiology, ancient or modern; thus, its periodic references to physiological processes—activities of the “heart,” for example—may well involve figurative descriptions of, or reflections on moral and theological issues, and if so, the passages in which they are found were clearly “understood” on that non-literal basis (e.g., “inner being” Isa. 26:9; “heart” Isa. 29:13). Moreover, going back in time and culture to the initial setting of communication, is it really true to say that “The Bible offers no new revelation of the workings of the material world, even though it offers to the original audience a revised vision of their theology concerning God’s work in the world” (53). It would seem, however, that a revised theology ideally should have significantly modified ancient Israel’s view of the natural world, at least in some respects, for example, in their understanding that storms on the Great Sea were not

¹⁷ Cf. W&S: “We propose instead that our doctrinal affirmations about Scripture (authority, inerrancy, infallibility, etc.) attach to the illocution of the human communicator. This is not to say that we therefore believe everything that he believed (he *did* believe that the sun moved across the sky), but we express our commitment to his communicative act. Since his locutionary framework is grounded in his language and culture, it is important to differentiate what the communicator can be inferred to believe and his illocutionary focus” (46). Perhaps we could better “express our commitment” to the “communicative act” of the composer of Scripture by suggesting that he was not expressing his understanding of cosmic geography in his description of the sun, but was simply reflecting on this daily occurrence using non-literal, poetic, phenomenological language.

the result of the capricious behavior of malevolent sea monsters, like “Rahab” (Psa. 89:10), nor was the land’s agricultural fertility dependent on religious rites related to the pagan deity “Baal” and his consort “Asherah” (1 Sam. 16:32-33).

I agree with Walton that “the Bible typically does not offer information about . . . aspects of the physical world that science could either prove or disprove” (55), and that it is important to carefully investigate whatever claims are made in the text as to whether they are “theological, cosmological, scientific and/or historical” (56). I would simply add the obvious point that this process of hermeneutical evaluation must be carried out with due respect for the literary character of the text itself, whether figurative or literal, poetic or narrative, apocalyptic or legislative.

Summary: “*How the Composition of the Old Testament May Be Understood Differently in Light of What is Known of Ancient Literary Culture*” (60). One principle that W&S want us to think differently about is that “authorship and the process that led to the final form of the canonical book are simply not as relevant as we had thought to our understanding of biblical authority” (62). So, for example:

Whatever role Moses had in Genesis would be the role of tradent [text transmitter] as opposed to the role of authority [or “author”] since Genesis never invokes Moses’ authority for the traditions that it contains.¹⁸ Even if Moses were considered one of the primary tradents for Genesis (certainly reasonable), there would be no reason to consider him the first, the last or the only tradent (61).

However, given my alternative understanding of how “high value” texts like sacred Scripture are composed, I would not want to abandon or reduce the relevance of unique or singular authorship (or that of text-creator/composer) so readily (arguably the perspective also of Christ, e.g., regarding “Isaiah”—Mk. 7:6). To be sure, God could have inspired a generative “authority figure,” a series of authors, a sequence of scribes, “or, more abstractly, the tradition itself (passed on by various tradents)” (63)¹⁹ to produce the canonical text of the Bible that we currently base our faith and life upon.

Part of my problem with respect to the new proposal of W&S pertains to its apparent basis or motivation—namely, “what we have learned about literary production in the ancient world” (62). While it is indeed helpful to carry out historically based, comparative linguistic and literary studies with respect to nearby religious traditions, such as those of Egypt or Mesopotamia, I prefer to regard the authoritative texts of the Old Testament (also the NT) as *sui generis* and thus not *directly* relatable to the literatures of surrounding pagan nations with respect to either content or intent. I therefore do not agree with the evolutionary “model” that W&S propose, “which agrees with traditional source criticism in that it understands the final literary form of the biblical books to be relatively late and generally not the literary product of the authority figure whose words the book preserves” (66).²⁰ In my opinion “source criticism” is not a valid explanatory

¹⁸ This assertion appears to contradict what is stated on the preceding page, namely, “that Moses is the authority whose words are represented and that he was generating documents can be readily accepted” (60).

¹⁹ Furthermore, a disparate “community” of individuals could not be attributed with a coherent communicative locution, illocution, or perlocution—that is, according to standard “speech-act theory.”

²⁰ For example: “When the New Testament speakers (sic) refer to the work of Isaiah, they are referring to the literary documents in their time that have been subsumed under the authority of the prophet. This has nothing to do with authorship, and therefore we ought not be including discussions of Isaiah as the

model to account for the excellent “final literary form” of the various books of Scripture, bar none.²¹ True “divine inspiration” radically changes not only the character and authority of the biblical literature, but also, I submit, the unique qualitative manner in which it was composed and subsequently transmitted.²² This fundamental principle naturally influences how I am evaluating and responding to the various propositions set forth in *The Lost World of Scripture*, including Walton’s proposals (69-72) to account for “biblical composition and authority” (68) with respect to individual Old Testament books (e.g., Genesis, Deuteronomy) and genre groups (e.g., the Prophets). I am rather uncomfortable, therefore, being left with a proposed nebulous, unorganized process of composition and transmission such as the following, with regard to the individual prophetic books:

Whether in the lifetime of the prophet or some generations later, a compilation process obviously took place to create the collections that we have as the prophetic books. We have nothing that indicates who is responsible for that work. The prophets’ disciples or successors may or may not have been involved. We cannot rule out the possibility that material could have been added or the oracles revised over time. At this point we want to emphasize that...we no longer should be concerned about the prophets as *authors* of their books (72, original italics).²³

Such a scenario, in my opinion, allocates far too much “creative” activity and control, hence also authority, to the progressive development of a textual “tradition” under the supposed supervision of a sequence of anonymous scribes and indistinct “faith communities” (73).

P 5: “*Much of the Literature of the Greco-Roman World Retained Elements of a Hearing-Dominant Culture*” (77). As we now shift our attention to “understanding the literary production of the New Testament,” the alleged “starting point is the culture of the Greeks and Romans and how their literature was formed and functioned” (77). While I would agree that even “after the

‘author’ of his ‘book’ when we talk about inerrancy” (65). I can accept W&S’s point about using the terms “author” and “book” in an anachronistic sense to a prophetic work like that of Isaiah. But why not “composer” of the “scroll”? I feel that the canonical “book” of Isaiah is much more coherent and unified, the product of a single compositional “source,” than what W&S seem to allow for. “Walton and Sandy suggest a model that emphasizes an authority as the ‘fountainhead’; they posit a process that resembles more Wikipedia than our solitary, contemporary author but still results in an inerrant canonical text” (E. R. Richards, online review @ ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/book.pl/review).

²¹ For an exemplified defense of this position, see E. Wendland, *Translating the Literature of Scripture* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2004) and with a specific Old Testament focus: *Lovely, Lively Lyrics: Selected Studies in Biblical Hebrew Verse* (SIL International, 2013) and *Prophetic Rhetoric: Case Studies in Text Analysis and Translation* (SIL International, 2014).

²² I recognize that there are difficulties in the case of a biblical “book” such as that of Samuel or Jeremiah for which “multiple textual traditions were preserved among the scrolls,” but I do not conclude with W&S that “there was *not only one original form* of the final literary piece” (67, added emphasis). I would rather assert that the “one original form” intended by God under inspiration has been providentially preserved in the Masoretic text that has come down to us, despite the fact that at present, until further textual evidence becomes available, scholars are unable to document its compositional history with certainty. The notion of “multiple originals” of biblical books is becoming popular among biblical scholars, e.g., G. D. Martin, *Multiple Originals...Textual Criticism* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010).

²³ Walton does add this qualifier in a footnote with reference to “material could have been added or the oracles revised over time”: “Not in a freewheeling process but one that would have been accountable under the careful scrutiny of the scribal schools and the faith community” (72). However, I do not see such supervision as a credible option unless the initial oral and/or written composition of the biblical “author” (or “authority figure”) was to a great extent already verbally established. Otherwise, too much leeway is left for radical scribal theories like those of van der Toorn: “If the Bible became the Word of God, it was due to their presentation. Both the production and the promotion of the Hebrew Bible were the work of the scribes. ... [in fact] generations of scribes, each new one continuing work of previous ones” (2007:2, 7).

rise of written literature, features of orality continued to influence how people perceived and received literature” (85), and that, similarly, “the interplay of orality and textuality...lays important groundwork for reorienting our thinking to the hearing-dominant culture of the New Testament” (86), I do not accept the thesis that this foundation was laid solely “in the Greco-Roman world” (86). Though written in Greek and also influenced by some important concepts and institutions of the Roman Empire (especially in Paul’s letters), I believe that the essential conceptual basis for the NT writings is found in Semitic culture and the familiar (even memorized!) religious texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, albeit mediated in certain circumstances and contexts by the influential Septuagint Greek translation.

P 6: “*Oral and Written Approaches to Literature Entail Significant Differences*” (87). The discussion of this proposition includes a useful comparative overview of some of the chief differences between oral and written communication—most points of which are not surprising, e.g., “Orality functions particularly well in communicating powerful messages to smaller groups of people” (92), while “Textuality can communicate to a larger group of people over wider geographical areas and longer periods of time” (93). However, I noted several debatable assertions along the way—for example: “In the written communication of text-dominant societies, hearers hold the reins: they choose whether to read, what, by whom and when; they may decide for themselves what and author meant” (91). Would not the same strictures not apply also to the hearers of oral texts? It is also claimed that “in written communication what an author writes is *not* shaped in significant ways by what is read” (92, original emphasis). This appears to refer to the fact that “Author and audience do not interact directly,” and therefore, “It is up to readers to uncover what authors intended” (92). But, to a lesser degree, that is true also for oral communication, especially in cases where either the audience is not familiar with the speaker, or where the speaker discourses upon a subject that is not familiar to the audience.

P 7: “*Greek Historians, Philosophers, and Jewish Rabbis Offer Instructive Examples of Ancient Oral Culture*” (97). The most interesting part of this chapter is its final summary of the similarities between Jesus and the Jewish rabbis of his day. On the other hand, while it is correct to say that “Jesus was a passionate guardian of Old Testament law” (108), it should also be noted that on many occasions he had to teach a corrective to the current rabbinic tradition (e.g., Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). While it may be true in the absence of contradictory evidence to maintain that “Jesus wrote nothing,” it is misleading to claim further that “it was sufficient for his oral texts to remain oral”—or that “It was not until approximately twenty years after Jesus public ministry that the first written accounts of his words and deeds were inscribed in the Gospels” (108). What would have prevented snippets of speeches and summaries of debates with the Pharisees or of parable texts from being recorded on the occasion using any available writing material (e.g., a *pinakidion*, Luke 1:63, perhaps by Matthew, the former, undoubtedly literate tax collector, Mt. 9:9-10)?²⁴

²⁴ “The case being made is for written notes of individual sayings, or a collection of some, and reports of remarkable events. This is not to say the Evangelists began to compose the Gospels in Jesus’ lifetime, but that some, possibly much of their source material, was preserved in writing from that period, especially accounts of distinctive teachings and actions of Jesus” (Allan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* [Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 2000], pp. 223-224). For Harry Gamble, “there are excellent reasons to conclude that the collection of sayings of Jesus (“Q”), which was employed in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, was not merely a fund of oral tradition but a written source” (*Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995], p. 22).

P 8: “Jesus’ World Was predominantly Non-Literate and Oral” (111). The elaboration of this proposition leads off with a rather distorted characterization of Christ’s teaching ministry: “Jesus, the Middle-Eastern Storyteller--...traveled from village to village preaching sermons and telling mind-bending stories. Actually, according to the Gospels, Jesus preached few sermons yet told frequent stories” (111; cf. 119).²⁵ However, the textual evidence does not bear this statement out. Most of the material in the discourses attributed to Christ in the Gospels would qualify as teaching-preaching, not as story-telling. Of course, Jesus did tell many parables, especially later in his ministry when the crowds began turning away as they realized that he was not the Messiah that they had in mind (Mt. 13:10-17; cf. 11:20). Consider one of Jesus’ earliest and longest discourses—the so-called, Sermon on the Hillside (Mt. 5-7)—where a short story-parable occurs only at the very end (The Wise and Foolish Builders, 7:24-27).²⁶ The claim is made that “Reading Mark’s Gospel in particular is like watching a fast-moving train, with miracles and parables hitched together as close as railroad cars” (111). Though the comparison here is graphic, it is not quite accurate, for after the parable-packed chapter four of Mark, another one is not recorded until the Parable of the Tenants (Mk. 12:1-11), after Christ’s final entry into Jerusalem (ch. 11). To be sure, Jesus did utilize many “word pictures, dramatic actions, metaphors, and stories” (111), but these, and more, were all part of his repentance-focused, Kingdom-centered teaching technique, and not part of his repertory as a popular itinerant raconteur.

A special aim of *The Lost World of Scripture* appears to seek to ameliorate and prioritize the oral-aural word over the written text: “Although the people had secondhand acquaintance with texts, their world was hearing dominant. ... Jesus’ hearers had no reason to expect and no reason to need his sayings to be recorded in writing” (120). But why then do we find so frequently in the Gospels the saying “it is written” (*gegraptai/grammenon estin*; Mt. 2:5, Mk. 1:2; Lk. 2:23; Jn. 2:17)? Reference is made to Jesus’ “standard formula” “when he cited verses from the Old Testament”: “You have heard that it was said...” (114). However, in those days there was not a great deal of conceptual difference between “it is said” and “it is written,” whether or not an actual OT text was being referred to. In fact, I would argue that by the New Testament age (the first century), the expression “it is said” carried authoritative weight for Christ and the apostles (not necessarily the rabbis) because the words under consideration already “stood written” in some OT book-scroll. W&S would not agree with that position, but I feel that the biblical evidence supports it as much, if not more than giving undue priority to the oral word, for example, as I interpret proposition 9 to be doing.²⁷

²⁵ Sandy adds in a parenthesis: “Maybe Christians should learn a lesson” (111). However, this advice is based on the premise that Jesus was primarily a “storyteller,” which I do not agree with.

²⁶ This discourse is in fact termed by the people listening as a rabbinic-style “teaching” (*didachee*), not a “story-parable” (*parabolee*) (7:28).

²⁷ I do not mean to imply that W&S completely ignore the importance of the written word of Scripture. For example: “A lack of literacy, however, does not equate with a lack of textuality. Jewish identity was formed and informed by texts created and transmitted. The Torah was fundamental to everything Jewish, and Jews were well aware of the power of texts over their lives” (115). That is indeed an excellent description of the situation that I would also fully agree with. It just seems that in their worthy effort to describe the often-neglected influence of orality on Jewish life, culture, and their Scriptures, they sometimes tend to exaggerate the points of their various arguments, at the expense of the written text, thus leaving their position open to criticism or possible misinterpretation.

P 9: “*Logos/Word Referred to Oral Communication, Not to Written Texts*” (121). This is one of the more problematic of the 21 propositions set forth in *The Lost World of Scripture*.

Unfortunately, it is attached to other categorical, and I feel, inaccurate assertions, like the one at the end of this chapter: “The cognitive environment of the gospel message was entirely oral” (127; cf. my discussion of P 8). Some familiar passages of Scripture are also involved, for if we accept P 9, “we may have to rethink one of our favorite verses: ‘For the word [*logos*] of God is quick...’ (Heb 4:12 KJV)” (123). Sandys goes on to state: “Strictly speaking, the proclamation of God’s truth—the oral text of the gospel—is the powerful and life-changing *word of God*” (123, original emphasis). However, this argument cannot be sustained, not even within the context in which this passage appears, for in Hebrews 4 alone, in the argument leading up to verse 12, the author references three distinct Old Testament texts—Psalm 95:11 (twice), Genesis 2:2, and Psalm 95:7-8. To be sure, this instruction is set within an oral-aural setting—hence, “God has said...” (12:3) and “he spoke through David, as was said before” (12:7).²⁸ But as Sandy himself observes, seemingly undermining his own proposition, “It’s likely that the [the Evangelists] did not see a significant distinction between oral and written texts” (125).

Other well-known NT passages are seemingly contorted to conform to an emphasis upon the predominant influence of orality. With regard to Luke’s prologue, for example (Lk. 1:1-4):

A paraphrase of the relevant parts of what Luke wrote could be worded as follows: “I have investigated what the earliest eyewitnesses—indeed, they were servants of the word—*passed down orally*, so that by my written version of what happened you can be assured of the certainty of the words you were taught” (125, italics indicate words not present in the original text).²⁹

In this case, there is simply no evidence that Luke limited himself to oral texts only when doing his research; in fact, a strong argument can be made that he did have at least the text of Mark (or its precursor, perhaps even the hypothetical “Q source”) at hand when he composed his Gospel account.³⁰ In fact, it is possible to reverse the preceding argument—that is, hypothetically thinking, and extending by anticipation and implication certain references in the Gospels to the immediate oral “word” (*logos*) of Christ also to their eventual written occurrence as well, for example, using passages cited by Sandy: “Mt 24:35; Mk 13:31; Lk 2:33” (124), and “‘I have given them your word’ (Jn 17:14)” (127). My position is not that orality was not influential in the composition, transmission, and understanding of the Scriptures (OT & NT); it certainly was, and W&S have done well to document this. However, why go to the other extreme and limit the actual presence, influence, and authority of the written word by asserting: “When the context was the ministry of Jesus, *logos* (or *rhêma*) denoted [only?] speech” (127)?

P 10: “*Jesus Proclaimed Truth in Oral Forms and Commissioned His Followers to Do the Same*” (128). The same difficulty presents itself here as in the case of P 9: Why the apparent—in

²⁸ To this point, the comment is later made: “It’s significant that while *logos* can refer to the Old Testament, Matthew and Mark record that Jesus introduced the quotes with *legô*, *God said* [Mt. 15:4-6; cf. Mk. 7:10-13—but note “written” Jn. 10:34; 15:25]. So although we may find *logos* in the context of words that were written, it may actually be *referring to the oral forms of the text behind the written forms*” (126, our emphasis). But I find such reasoning far too great a stretch in the effort to prove one’s point.

²⁹ Later Sandy states his case even more strongly, but as I believe, wrongly: “Even without Luke using the word *logos* we might have concluded that he is referring to oral texts that form the basis of his Gospel. But *logos* confirms it” (139-140).

³⁰ Later on Sandy admits that “Whether there were intermediate written forms between the oral and written texts of the Gospels we cannot be sure” (150). However, this highly probable option is almost entirely ignored in his discussion.

view of the prevailing argument, implied—restriction to the *oral* word, instead of oral *as well as* written? Certainly, the immediate reference in passages such as Matthew 28:19 is to oral-aural “teaching,” but my understanding would extend that mandate by implication, especially for Christ’s future disciples, also to the *written* basis of his instructions and all those embedded in the Scriptures as a whole. In his survey of several of the principal scholars who promoted “a major shift in the study of the Gospels” (130), Sandy favors those who favor a more fluid, as opposed to a more fixed Gospel tradition, for example Werner Kelber over Birger Gerhardsson, leaving us with “the most up-to-date survey of research pertaining to oral texts of Jesus’ words and deeds”: “performances of the tradition accrued a sense of stability and repetition by way of multiple performances through time ... performances of the Jesus tradition [that] neither depended upon *script* nor left behind *transcript*” (132, original emphasis).³¹

The emphasis on the “performances” of Scripture throughout *The Lost World of Scripture* naturally privilege the oral, fluid, spoken word; however, I would prefer to term these, less theatrically, as “proclamations” of Scripture, which depended much more closely on relatively stable, inscribed Gospel traditions from a much earlier date than that envisioned by Sandy.³² This bias towards orality and performance leads to many questionable assertions in this chapter, a selection of which follows (*with my responsive comments being distinguished by italics*):

- “In fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, Jesus didn’t come with written words; he came with a new covenant in which God’s law would be written on people’s hearts” (135). *I do not see the old versus the new covenants involving a distinction between the written and the oral Word of God, as the reference to the Jeremiah passage (31:31-33) seems to suggest. The difference rather had to do with the essential nature of each covenant: reiterated sacrificial, anticipatory, temporal, ethnic (Old) versus the once-for-all Sacrifice of Christ, which realized or fulfilled the eternal and universal New Covenant.*
- “But Jesus was never recorded as saying something like, ‘This is important; write it down.’ And the disciples gave no indication during Jesus’ ministry that the thought ever crossed their minds of inscribing anything Jesus said or did” (135). *But this argument from silence is not convincing. The fact that Jesus referred very often to the authoritative “written” text of the Old Testament (not merely “several references,” fn. 17) clearly implied that he had the same goal in mind for his spoken words (e.g., Jn. 15:22).³³ As already noted, it seems inconceivable that various notes and records of Jesus’ important*

³¹ Citing here Rafael Rodríguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), p. 4; cf. also Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe, ASNU 22 (Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1961); Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1983). For a critical survey of these and associated scholars, see Wendland, *Orality and Scripture*, 87-105.

³² My, admittedly minority, position is supported by scholars such as Millard: “If written sources are allowed to stand behind the Gospels [Millard’s claim], then there is also the possibility that some of them were copied and circulating when the idea of assembling a connected account of Jesus’ life was realized. There is no good reason why Mark may not be seen as a work based upon written sources as well as oral ones. My contention would envisage numerous random notes and reports, often about the same words and events, some preserved by individuals, some perhaps collected by interested believers. As the church grew and spread to regions beyond the physical reach of the apostolic community, so there would be greater demands for first-hand accounts of the Master’s life and teachings, stimulating compositions resulting in the Gospels” (*Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, p. 227). “The extended genealogies of Jesus given in Matthew and Luke are not the sort of material to have been orally preserved; their documentary content suggests that they were in written form from the beginning” (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, p. 23).

³³ Sandy indirectly addresses my argument on p. 137. This “tranquilizes the concept that an oral culture has the ability to preserve truth over long periods of time.” However, I believe that it is not “wrong to

teachings and activities would not have begun to be inscribed, whether formally or informally, and circulated already during his three-year ministry—perhaps in some cases even by his enemies to serve as eventual evidence against him!

- “As demonstrated in proposition 9, the referent for logos was Jesus’ oral texts, so a written form of his words was not the focal point” (137). In my opinion, proposition 9 was *not* demonstrated (see above), but that is beside the point here, which is that “Jesus expected his spoken words to have lasting permanence” (137). *But how could they become permanent unless recorded, sooner rather than later, in writing? It is not only a matter of permanence, but accuracy and precise replicability too must have been a major concern, especially in view of the early heresies that quickly sprung up to plague the Christian church (perhaps Cerinthian Gnosticism); this could be accomplished only with the aid of concrete written texts.*
- With reference to Revelation 22:19, while it is true to say that “the function of Jesus’ statement was to declare his prophecy to be sacrosanct...inviolable and unchallengeable,” this does not support the claim that “a written version of Jesus’ words misses the point that Jesus was making” (138, emphasis added). *The issue again is both—and: whoever distorts the Lord’s words, whether oral or written, are anathematized.*
- The contention that “Jesus expected his spoken words to be remembered and passed on to others” (138) cannot, as Sandy appears to suggest, involve a strict limitation to the oral message of the Gospel, for example: “Unmistakably, the oral form of Jesus’ teaching was sufficient for his purposes and for his followers’ needs” ... “So it would be the oral message of the apostles that would build the church” (139). *I can see no reason for this exclusive restriction to orality when communicating Christ, either during his own time or immediately thereafter in the apostolic age.*
- With reference to John 21:24, it is asserted that “Since the Greek word *witness* [*martureō*] generally designated something oral, the first part of John’s statement refers to the eyewitness role of passing along oral texts of Jesus’ words and deeds. Apparently that went on for decades without John writing anything down” (141). *My interpretation of this passage would contend, on the contrary, that the noun “testimony” (marturia) at the end of v. 24 refers to the “truth” of John’s eyewitness verification of Christ’s words and deeds as well as his present written record (grapsas) of them in his Gospel.³⁴ A similar argument can be made in a corresponding passage of John’s first Epistle (1:2), where the same verb, *marureō*, refers to what the Apostle is presently writing to his addressees (see also 1 Peter 5:12). There is simply no evidence for the claim that John wrote nothing down until the latter part of the first century.*

The preceding accumulation of evidence would encourage readers of *The Lost World of Scripture* to value, but also to carefully evaluate the claims that are advanced in this book. Much of the authors’ exposition is on target and offers very helpful information about “ancient literary culture” in relation to the early composition and transmission of the Scriptures. Unfortunately, I find that periodically the presentation is marred by an unwarranted over-emphasis upon the *oral* dimension of communication and an associated devaluation of the complementary testimony of an authoritative *written* Word of God (John 21:31; 2 Timothy 3:15-16).

P 11: “*Variants Were Common in the Oral Texts of Jesus’ Words and Deeds*” (143).

Since variants are common also in the written texts of the New Testament, the content of this proposition is not exceptional. However, Sandy does underscore the importance of communal

presume that Jesus’ words...became more permanent when recorded in oral form” (137). In my experience of recording and analyzing various African oral traditions over the years, I have observed that folktales, proverbs, riddles, even songs can be memorized and performed in nearly exact form, though variations of various types are common and often appreciated. The point is that where false teaching is concerned, it takes only a few words for an entire text to go astray, and a written record has the capacity at least to preserve an accurate account more readily than its oral correspondent.

³⁴ In fact we note John’s emphasis upon “writing” (*graphō*) his testimony—5x in Jn. 20:30-31, 21:24-25.

memory and repetition, and with reference to the research of Kenneth Bailey “in a traditional Middle Eastern culture” (144),³⁵ observes:

The reciters know that most of the villagers have heard the stories and poetry many times before, and they dare not veer too far from the standard structure and wording. This is especially true for proverbs and poetry: a single wrong word is quickly recognized by villagers (145).

If such informal control on the oral tradition is exercised in relation to secular literature, one would expect even more constraints to be observed where religious traditions are concerned, especially those believed to be of divine origin.³⁶ This proposition raises the question of the nature and significance of the oral Gospel variants in relation to their written record, an issue that is considered only later in proposition 13 (which for coherence sake should have followed P 11). When suggesting that “the four Gospels preserve differing accounts of many aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry” (147), it might have been noted that there may well be a reasonable explanation for the differing records (e.g., Mt. 7:11 and Lk. 11:13, i.e., “spiritual gifts”)—that is, over and above the possible Aramaic-to-Greek translation option (148).

P 12: “*Throughout the New Testament, Spoken Words Rather than Written Words Were the Primary Focus*” (152). As was indicated in my critique of P 10 (which P 12 should have followed), this categorical assertion seems to be a result of the author’s over-emphasis upon orality in relation to the New Testament record. While it may be true to say that the message of Christ in the Gospels and epistles was conveyed primarily through preaching, and that the book of Acts “records nothing about Christians composing written records of their messages or about any of the apostles writing letters” (153), why the gratuitous diminution of the written word?³⁷ As Sandy himself points out, a number of the epistles “were written during the time period covered by Acts” (153) and at least the Gospel of Mark as well. These texts regularly refer to the Old Testament writings,³⁸ whether in the original Hebrew or the LXX, as being the foundation for the message of the New Covenant (2 Pet. 1:19-21).³⁹ And already within the first century the apostolic writings were recognized as authoritative Scripture (2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Pet. 3:15-16).

Once again in this chapter, we see efforts to limit the denotative reference of key terms like *logos* and *rhêma* to the oral word alone: “Several favorite verses of many Christians—which they

³⁵ “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *Themelios* 20:2 (1995), 4-11.

³⁶ This is supported by the case study from Bailey’s research reported in ft. 19 on p. 136: Syrian Orthodox seminary students formulate and express their theology *exactly* by memorizing it in their hymnody.

³⁷ And how can we conclude, without evidence, that “there seemed to be no urgency to record the stories [about Jesus] in written form” (152)? In fact, Luke pays significant attention to the written record of OT Scripture in Acts, for example, at the very beginning with reference to its inspired fulfillment in a Gospel account (Acts 2:16, 20), with the latter possibly being an allusion to Matthew 27:3-8.

³⁸ “The force of Christian dependence on Jewish scripture for the question of the literary culture of early Christianity is not much appreciated, and its implications have been neglected under the influence of form criticism’s preoccupation with oral tradition” (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, p. 23)—a preoccupation frequently shared nowadays with the performance critical approach of W&S.

³⁹ This *written* Old Testament connection (2 Pet. 1:19) is regarded by Sandy as “an exception to *logos* denoting oral text” (156), and he later suggests, without due warrant, that “Peter’s focus was on the oral precursor to written Scripture” (184). I do not view such prophetic usage as an exception, and furthermore, I would not want to read too much into the fact that the “book of Hebrews in particular uses language of speech to cite the Old Testament” (156; cf. 2 Pet. 1:21). The writers of Scripture, whether OT or NT, clearly did not make as sharp a distinction between the oral and written forms of Scripture as we do today. Such a differentiation in the divine medium of communication would seem to be one of those “anachronistic misconceptions” (62) that W&S in fact wish to correct in their book.

assume refer *directly* to the written words of Scripture—actually do not” (155, emphasis added). But what is the point of this distinction—how does it profit believers to apply Paul’s metaphor of “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word [*rhêma*] of God” (Eph. 6:17) to the oral word or preaching alone? Is not the implicit extension to the written word quite evident in the text? The very fact that these words were recorded in writing and have been read in some form by Christians throughout the ages implies that the written text is now the fulfillment, as it were, of the message that was orally preached to people in Gospel as well as apostolic times. I do not deny the fact that “Christians retaining and proclaiming the oral text of the gospel was essential for the community of believers to become mature in faith and wisdom” (155). But why seek then to limit the saving message to its oral-aural form? Truth be told, “it made little difference whether Paul preached something orally or wrote it in a letter” (162), so why proceed with so many speculative discriminatory statements such as this: “Neither Jesus nor Paul seemed to think there was any urgency to record truth in written form” (165)?

P 13: “*Exact Wording Was Not Necessary to Preserve and Transmit Reliable Representatives of Inspired Truth*” (167). I agree, but before giving up too much ground to anything other than “exact wording” with regard to the truths of Scripture, we really ought to appreciate how well-preserved and internally harmonious the various documents of the Bible are both intra-textually and inter-textually in relation to each other. I therefore affirm Sandy’s conclusion that there is no “doubt about the [excellent] preservation of the text of the New Testament” (169), and I appreciate his survey of the “legitimate reasons for the variants” (170) that appear in the manuscripts (170-173). “Only about four hundred variants have significant bearing on the meaning of the New Testament” (174). I would also argue further that few, if any of these have any real theological or ethical significance due to the manifold internal conceptual coherence of the Scriptures as a whole (179).⁴⁰ However, when Sandy discusses the “implications of manuscript culture” for “the transmission of texts of the New Testament” (175), we again encounter some questionable assertions in favor of the distinctive emphasis upon orality found in *The Lost World of Scripture*.

Once more the issue of “authorship” fades into the background as scribes again (as in the case of the proposed Old Testament scenario) take center stage in the process of textual transmission:

- “Scribes who made initial written copies of a community’s oral texts were not copyists per se; perhaps *replicators* would be an appropriate designation, or *tradents*. They were responsible for transmitting the traditions. Based on their acquaintance with the oral texts of the community, they crafted written versions that would have been fully recognizable to (and probably subject to the approval of) the community” (176). *Serious questions abound: Who were these “scribes,” how were they trained? What all was involved in “crafting written versions,” and what verbally constitutes “fully recognizable”? Who comprised this vague “community,” and how did they function to control both the oral and now the rapidly developing written tradition of the New Testament? I consider this proposal to be far too vague and ill-defined and hence prefer to postulate a much more controlled process of textual composition and transmission—that is, by “eyewitnesses” of the Gospel and subsequently by authorized “traditioners.”*⁴¹

⁴⁰ On the other hand, I would question any call “for a theology of Scripture that does not depend on the original wording of the text” (180) as being confusing and potentially open to misunderstanding.

⁴¹ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 264-279. The sharp distinction drawn by W&S between oral and written texts “is inappropriate in a society that, though predominantly oral, did make use of written texts. ... Where books existed not so much to be read as to be heard and their contents to be held in the memory and

- “Handwritten texts were essentially oral texts that had been inscribed in writing. They were ancillary, not primary; surrogates, not principals; derivative, not superlative. Nor did manuscript culture consider handwritten texts to be an advancement beyond oral texts; they were an extension, not a replacement” (178). *While the essence of these assertions are true, and the basic oral character of biblical texts must always be taken into consideration during their analysis and interpretation, I would prefer not to depreciate the character and purpose of written texts quite so much. The written Scripture is, after all, the only permanent textual representative of the Word of God that we have available for our information and edification, and I suspect that Christians began to realize their value, stability, authority, and perhaps even primacy in this regard much sooner in time than The Lost World seems to imply.*
- “It seems clear that being scrupulously diligent about exactitude in transmitting oral and written texts was simply not practiced by early Christians. ... Though it may appear to turn our world upside down, the correct conclusion is that exacting detail and precise wording were not necessary to preserve and transmit the truths of Scripture” (181). *While it may be true that the lack of widespread, carefully copied manuscripts in the early church resulted in many more variants than in later years, it would be wrong to conclude that Christian leaders were not concerned about such variation and did not seek to restrain it. I therefore support Bauckham’s hypothesis regarding the general attitude towards the degree of “exactitude” exercised: “The exact form [of a text of Scripture, with specific reference to a Pauline epistle], with a high degree of memorized learning, would be preserved by teachers specifically commissioned to be guardians of the tradition” (Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, p. 282).⁴²*

Summary: “*How the Composition of the New Testament May Be Understood Differently in Light of What Is Known of Ancient Literary Culture*” (183).

This chapter reiterates a number of the primary arguments set forth in propositions 5-13, and I will simply note in passing several misleading notions that have already been pointed out:

- “...for a decade or more after Jesus’ earthly ministry texts of the good news were only oral...” (183). ... Jesus embraced the cognitive environment, using—like philosophers and rabbis—oral texts rather than written” (186; cf. 194). *I cannot find sufficient evidence for these claims. In fact, I would argue that Christ’s first encounter with the Jewish teachers “in the temple courts” involved at least some reference to scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures (Lk. 2:46-47).*
- “And written texts did not supplant oral texts... Since both were performed orally and received aurally, there was little distinction between them” (185). *I would rather assert that written texts, whether readily accessible on a given occasion or not, once available would naturally form the primary point of reference when discussing Scripture. Even if a speaker were quoting or alluding to an oral version from memory, the text’s authority and status derived from the fact that “it had been written” and preserved by the religious community as a divinely inspired document,⁴³ perhaps by the middle of the first century even already canonized. “Written texts were advantageous...as a means of providing access to the traditions for a wider audience” (195)—but primarily as a means of stabilizing the traditions in preparation for their canonization, sooner or later.*

transmitted orally as well as in writing, we should not draw too sharp a distinction between the memorization or written and oral material” (Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 280).

⁴² Bauckham further suggests that “the form of memorization would vary according to the type of material being memorized. ... Our extant examples of differing versions show that exact wording is much more likely in the case of sayings of Jesus than in the narratives about Jesus” (ibid., p. 284).

⁴³ “To be sure, the Old Testament was an authoritative and indispensable source for the presentation of the gospel message... The Gospels in particular show that Jesus carefully interpreted the Old Testament—if not clarified its true meaning... Further, the logical arguments in the letters of Paul, Peter and others were often dependent on wording from the Old Testament” (191). Even if it were true that “Jesus and the apostles were not quoting from written texts of the Old Testament but from oral texts” (192), I would argue that the primary frame of semantic reference (the ideal “prototype”) and locus of illocutionary authority was an assumed written and faithfully preserved text of Scripture.

- “The core value of the New Testament pertaining to communication was orality, not textuality. Throughout the Gospels, Acts and Letters, the focus was oral texts” (186). *I rather see a dual focus: “oral—written,” as W&S themselves seem to acknowledge: “...oral texts were not clearly delineated from written ones and were often seen to be nearly one and the same...” (192). By NT times the oral testimony of Christian preachers and teachers was based upon or referenced to the written Scriptures, perhaps including incipient NT-era writings; these written texts in turn were “proclaimed” (rather than “performed” [185], which allows too much emphasis upon the personal performer)—widely to diverse audiences everywhere.*
- I remain uncomfortable with the postulation of an “assumed trajectory of authority” in the case of the books of the Old Testament that allows for substantial revisions or additions after the death of the text’s principal compositional authority (under divine inspiration), for example, with reference to certain “sermons and other oral pronouncements of Moses” that “may have been produced by later generations following various stages of oral transmission” (193).
- Worse yet is a sort of pseudepigraphic perspective on the process of recording the texts of the Old Testament: “Most of the authorities in the Old Testament might not have been authors [not even primary text ‘composers’?] themselves, even though written texts are associated with their names” (194). *I have no problem in saying that “the authorities expressed truths orally, and someone else wrote what they said” (194); it is the allowance for any major addition, subtraction, or revision under their authoritative name after they died that I have objection to.*
- “To say that there are errors in the Bible is to read Scripture anachronistically. Conversely, those who say there are not errors need to make clear that they are representing an ancient view of reliable representations of truth. ... Copyists and scribes focused on transmitting the essential meaning of texts in the best ways possible for the benefit of their audiences. Preserving exact wording was not necessary in their minds, nor in the minds of the New Testament authors when they quoted from copies of the Old Testament” (196). *One’s acceptance or rejection of these assertions depends crucially on a definition of terms, for example: what counts as an “error” and what constitutes a “reliable representation of truth” or “the essential meaning” of a text? I prefer a stricter, more text-focused and constrained explanation of the text composition and transmission process. I also posit a qualitative difference between NT “authors” and their “scribes” when assessing their respective handling of the texts of Scripture—that is, having more versus less freedom to innovate with respect to communicating the written tradition at hand. Finally, the seemingly relativistic conception of textual “error” being proposed leads me to wonder what impact this approach has for the field of textual criticism—is it still relevant at all? And what about the application to Bible translation: Are translators now able to practice their craft with the apparent freedom that was exercised by the text’s earliest scribes and tradents?*

P 14:⁴⁴ “*The Authority of the Old Testament Narrative Literature Is More Connected to Revelation Than to History*” (199). Here we revisit the speech-act notions of “locution” (verbal form), “illocution” (discourse function), and “perlocution” (anticipated response) from proposition 3 in an effort to distinguish ancient “historiography” from “mythography.” The aim of W&S in this chapter is demonstrate that “ancient narratives labeled historiography are [not] engaged in the same literary goals of what we might label historiography today” (201). Old Testament narrative is described in line with (pagan) Mesopotamian texts as “event-oriented literature,” which is “selective, and its selectivity reflects the intentions and/or the agenda of the author, or more properly, given the scribal culture of the ancient world, of the sponsor of the narrative” (203). The terminological problem that arises then for W&S is that “only texts can be inspired, inerrant or authoritative. If we are to penetrate the poetics (texts), we have to be willing to see the event and its significance through the author’s eyes, value system, beliefs and conventions” (204). But OT narrative is not only event-oriented, it is also profoundly ideological

⁴⁴ At this point we begin Part 3 of the book: “The Biblical World of Literary Genres” (197).

(theological) in character, and this seemingly (though W&S do not explicitly say so) brings it into the realm of “mythography,” which shows less interest in portraying events than in rendering the world meaningful through addressing how the world works and how it got that way” (205). Thus, “while the narrative literature we often refer to as historiography offers a representation of events, the object of that literature is often ideological” (207).

So how are we today to perceive and interpret these OT narratives, all the while distinguishing them from modern historiography which allegedly provides us with an erroneous perspective?⁴⁵ Here is where the speech-act theory must be applied, that is, “articulating the illocution of event-oriented literature,” which admittedly, “is not always straightforward” (208). Thus, with reference to the ancient narrators, the question that needs to be answered is this: “What did they intend to do (illocution), and what conventions did they use to do it?” (209). Consider Noah and the Flood account, for example: We must realize that “the communicators (sic) conveyed this reality by means of their own rhetorical conventions and limited cosmic geography, and the events have been edited...to convey the intended outcome” (211-212).⁴⁶ So “if the illocution of the communicator is to be found in the values and outcomes, then our responsibility [today] is to affirm those values and outcomes” (212).

We should not be asking, What is the event? (typically the goal of modern historiography). We should be asking, What is the outcome that the author sees as the result of a series of real events, and what value does that outcome have? What reality does that outcome embody? (212).⁴⁷

Unfortunately, this proposed culturally-relativistic literary methodology is not very transparent with regard to its application, and I find the suggested “conclusions” to be similarly difficult to assess in the absence of an extended hermeneutical illustration where the theoretical framework is actually employed to analyze a given biblical text (three selected quotes from 213-214, *with my subsequent comments or queries in italics*):

⁴⁵ “Historiography is *our* label, *our* enterprise, *our* value, *our* way of framing reality, *our* way of understanding events,” and “we cannot base our assessment of truth, authority, or inerrancy on our cultural conventions of historiography...” (210, original emphasis).

⁴⁶ Perhaps the cosmic geographical knowledge of the biblical authors was not as “limited” as many moderns assume. For example, a recognized NT scholar observes: “In my experience among scholars, few things draw out more cynicism than the Star of Bethlehem. But we need to remember that nowadays, Matthew’s gospel is widely acknowledged to be an *ancient biography*. When an ancient biography is written in the same century as its subject, it is generally characterized by a concern with *historical accuracy*. Books like Richard Bauckham’s *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* bear this out” (Colin R. Nicholl [author of *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015], interviewed by Greg Cootsona for *Christianity Today* and posted 23/11/2015; available online @ http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december/what-kind-of-astronomical-marvel-was-star-of-bethlehem.html?utm_source=ctweekly-html&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=14623599&utm_content=405000095&utm_campaign=2013).

⁴⁷ Sandy adds: “...common ideas about inerrancy are rooted in modernity. If it was permissible in the culture of the Bible to pass along narratives so that they would have the most powerful effect on people, which might include tweaking certain details, then the differences in details—say between the gospels—are not mistakes by ancient standards” (interview “Inerrancy and the *Lost World of Scripture: An Interview with D. Brent Sandy*” Posted online on May 16, 2014 by Jared S. Burkholder @ <http://sharperiron.org/article/book-review-lost-world-of-scripture>).

- “Most is not all of what are sometimes deemed historical inaccuracies or contradictions slip out of sight when we focus on the conventions of ancient literature, properly distinguishing locutions and illocutions. Fact checking (as much as it is possible) must always be done in the light of the acceptable ancient conventions.” *To what extent can the presumed conventions of ancient pagan (e.g., Mesopotamian) literatures be reliably utilized in the interpretation and assessment of Israel’s sacred Scriptures?*
- “Biblical authority is guided by the illocutions of the communicator and is based on adopting the ideas and values of the communicator and his perception of reality. Inerrancy operates on this level.” *How can authority of any kind be determined if “the communicator” is allegedly plural and disparate (i.e., an initial “authority figure” followed by a succession of text-interactive scribes), naturally resulting in a range of illocutions? The entire framework of communication is thus manifold, resulting in many different and unidentifiable historical and socio-religious settings (values, ideals, perceptions of reality, etc.) of text transmission—and potential modification. What is the level that inerrancy supposedly operates on under such complex circumstances of textual composition and transmission?*
- “Inerrancy cannot be maintained if we deny the reality of events and people that the text presents as real; but our affirmations of inerrancy cannot be based on the shape that we reconstruct for events by imposing our conventions and values on the ancient literature.” *In addition to my previous criticism, which applies here as well, another important aspect of evangelical hermeneutics needs to be applied. Indeed, we must not impose our personal (e.g., Western, 21st century) conventions and values on the biblical text, but there is a significant interpretive framework that we are obliged to apply, and that is the canonical principle that “the Scripture [a veritable unity in diversity] must be used to interpret itself.” No biblical book or text is an island unto itself and open only to interpretation with respect to its postulated external, chronological and cultural setting. A far more significant hermeneutical frame of reference is provided internally by closely related passages or pericopes, plus the overarching salvation-history “metanarrative” of the Bible (Old Testament and New Testament) as a whole.*

P 15: “*The Authority of Old Testament Legal Literature Is More Connected to Revelation Than to Law*” (216). Early in the discussion of this proposition, the question is raised: “How can the locutions of biblical laws be considered revelation from God if very similar locutions already existed in the rest of the ancient world?” (217). The Apostle Paul partly responds to this question in Romans 1:18-32: Similar ancient legal locutions that reflect the so-called “natural knowledge” of God and his will for humanity in life are obviously derived from divine revelation. What about those civil and ceremonial laws of Israel that we do not keep anymore (217)? The Bible itself answers that query: such legislation was part of the Old Testament covenantal relationship with the people of Israel that New Testament believers are no longer under obligation to observe (Colossians 2:13-23). Christ also reveals a new hermeneutical perspective for Christians by teaching about the human heart attitude that is also involved (e.g., Matthew chs. 5-7; cf. Jer. 31:33-34; Ezek. 11:19-20).

But Walton⁴⁸ proposes a more sophisticated distinction: “We have been suggesting that locutions commonly intersect with the culture of the people and accommodate society. Locutions [though inspired] do not carry independent authority and do not have to be new to be used in revelation” (217). He goes on to assert that “there is no reason to think that there was a *comprehensive, written, authoritative* document containing the legislation for Israelite society” (219, italics added). The three italicized qualifiers in the preceding sentence are apparently taken to exclude all the varied “legal sayings” (218) found in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy. The conclusion then is that “the general literary context for the legal collections of the Pentateuch is related to the covenant. In this case the illocution becomes *stipulations of a covenant agreement*

⁴⁸ John Walton is the primary author of chapters pertaining to the Old Testament (cf. p. 10).

rather than *legislation of a society*” (220, original italics). But why should one exclude the other—why not the use of varied legislative rules (moral, civil, ceremonial) to provide the people with an overt way of demonstrating their covenantal loyalty and an obedient relationship with Yahweh? But for Walton, “the ultimate perlocution [of these laws] is not justice or obedience. Those are only stops on the way toward holiness” (220). Therefore, since NT believers “are not party to the covenant relationship that God had with Israel, so the Pentateuch carries no perlocution for us that relates to remaining in covenant relationship with Yahweh or assuring that his presence is maintained in our midst” (220).

Finally, of what relevance are these texts and laws for Christians? Walton concludes (221):

The more general perlocution related to holiness, however, continues to carry significance into the canonical level of the text as it pertains to Christians. The legal sayings of the Pentateuch served as revelation not because they gave new laws (locutions), but because they showed God’s holiness even as he asked his people to be holy as he was.

I find this distinction to be rather tenuous, however, for how does one distinguish an implied command (illocution) not to consult mediums and diviners, for example (Lev. 20:6), from the explicit command to “consecrate yourselves and be holy” (Lev. 20:7a)? Both of these imperative locutions are at the same time legislative and revelatory because they originate from God and are associated with the divinely-empowered, declarative promise, “I am the LORD, who makes you holy!” (Lev. 20:7b). The effort to distinguish revelation from legislation as a means for establishing authority (P 15) and hence differentiating the temporal, culturally-specific aspects of the *Torah* from its timeless, universal principles appears to be overly discriminating with respect to the form, content, and function (intention) of these Pentateuchal texts.⁴⁹ As mentioned above, I would contend that the subsequent revelation of Scripture itself, namely, the words of Christ and his apostles, are sufficient to enable faith-communities today to make the necessary legislative distinctions and practical applications to the sanctified living of contemporary Christians. In the end, as far as the key term “inerrancy” is concerned, it may be appropriate, as Walton suggests, to apply this concept “to the source of the laws (Moses/God) rather than to the formulation of the laws (this is what the law actually was)” (223). The notion of “biblical authority,” however (cf. the book’s title) would cover both—source/intention as well as form/content, for I do not see how these textual dimensions can be conceptually separated if equally divinely inspired.

P 16: “*The Authority of Old Testament Prophetic Literature Is More Connected to Revelation Than to Future-Telling*” (224). In my opinion, a number of Walton’s proposals concerning the nature of divine “revelation” with respect to “Old Testament prophetic literature” weakens the case for the “authority” of the text, despite the fact that the entire “community of faith” governed process is described as occurring “under the supervision of the Holy Spirit” (225),⁵⁰ for example:

⁴⁹ Other contextually-oriented, linguistic-hermeneutical approaches may assist in this endeavor, for example, a layered, cognitively-based “frames of reference” methodology, e.g., E. Wendland, *Contextual Frames of Reference in Translation* (Manchester, UK: St. Jerome, 2008).

⁵⁰ Walton offers this disclaimer to the assertions of this chapter: “We are not presenting a conclusion about what did happen; we are presenting a model for incorporating any number of possibilities concerning what kinds of scenarios existed in the ancient world to map which battles should be fought, which hills to die on” (226). My problem with this approach is that it does not document to a significant extent the traditional conservative model of Hebrew text composition and transmission that may be used as a comparative basis.

- “If the community of faith decided that disciples of Isaiah wore his mantle and carried the extension of his authority, they could readily append the oracles of the successors to the work of the master” (226).⁵¹
- “With no ‘authors’ and no ‘books’ we cannot construct our understanding of the authority of the biblical texts based on those anachronisms. What we have learned about scribes has to inform our model” (226).⁵²
- “We are convinced that the multiple-layers scenario could have happened, that Isaiah would still be considered the authority figure and that a model of authority can easily incorporate that possibility. The result would be that the ‘authorship of Isaiah’ would not need to be viewed as a battleground” (227).⁵³
- “Is it possible that a follower of Daniel some centuries later expanded Daniel’s oracle in chapter 10 to include the details in chapter 11? We could not rule it out” (231).⁵⁴

In fact, I will note just a few of this chapter’s proposals that are almost distinguishable (outside of references to the Holy Spirit) from corresponding assertions that come from a more liberal theological perspective, as exemplified in many of the individual studies contained in a recent collection of essays edited by Brian B. Schmidt, *Contextualizing Israel’s Ancient Writings: Ancient Literacy, Orality, and Literary Production* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015; several citations follow). The latter volume (*CIAW*), of course, requires a separate critical review, as does a similar collection that focuses on orality: *The Interface of Orality and Writing: Speaking, Seeing, Writing in the Shaping of New Genres*, A. Weissenrieder and R.B. Coote, eds. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), for example: “In the quest to assign social roles within Second Temple cultic worship, the Chronicler took these traditions and elevated the authority of the Levitical singers by extending the commission to David. ... By elevating the Levitical singers as prophets, the Chronicler granted them scribal authority to compose and compile psalms, such as 1 Chr 16:8-36” (Roger S. Nam, *ibid.*: 320); “The creative combination of prophetic voices in Mark 1:2-3 further suggests that portions of the Gospel may have been similarly combined with other narratives not necessarily a part of this particular Gospel, but which became associated with it through the minds, memories, and experiences of hearers, resulting in retellings that constituted a new text” (Holly Hearon, *ibid.*:391-392).

⁵¹ During the compositional history of the prophetic books of the Bible, “the ‘written norm’ eventually achieved autonomy: as a result of that autonomy, prophecy turned into a religious activity that became more and more text-centered, so much so that after a few hundred years prophecy ceased to be an oral/aural activity and turned into *Schriftprophetie* in the strictest sense (i.e., prophecy that was composed in writing), as witnessed, amongst others, by the collection of texts referred to as “Trito-Isaiah” (Joachim Schaper, *CIAW*, p. 337).

⁵² The texts of ancient literature “were transmitted in ways that require an understanding of the role of the scribes in these traditions to compose/perform the texts in the transmission process in ways analogous to oral bards. That is, in their act of copying a text, these scribes were not mere copyists and the ‘variants’ suggest that each manuscript produced by a scribe is an imperfect representation of the tradition as preserved in the collective memory of the community. ... Thus, the Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles were competing contemporary historiographies of the postexilic period that had an exilic common source” (Raymond F. Pearson, Jr., *CIAW*, p. 197, 213).

“Large parts of the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean textual tradition, including the early manuscript traditions of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, may be understood as *mouvance*, e.g., as a (living) tradition in process of persistent regeneration. From the stability of later critical editions...the early Masoretic and Jesus traditions can appropriately be described as *mouvance*, e.g., as living tradition subject to reactivation and revisions” (Werner Kelber, “The History of the Closure of Biblical Texts,” in Weissenrieder and Coote, 2015:75).

⁵³ But I fear that such a battleground soon appears (and must be fought) once the positing of an initial majority compositional origin for a biblical book has been abandoned, for example: “Both neo-Documentarian and the wide spectrum of non-Documentarian scholars agree that the primeval history of Genesis 1—11 represents the interweaving of two previously integrated literary sources. ... This agreement on the interweaving of two preexisting coherent sources allows us an unusual opportunity to compare undisputed literary evidence, not only of existing texts, but also of a basic sort of textual development between Mesopotamian and Judahite scribal cultures. ... The result is that Genesis is radically incoherent, yet still strangely readable because of the way it was interwoven” (Seth L. Sanders, *CIAW*, p. 296, 298).

⁵⁴ Compare this New Testament speculative scenario: “Mark’s polemical thrust matches Paul’s, though it is more extreme. Mark takes the (church) hierarchy’s story of Jesus in terms of the Scriptural story

- “The more significant question concerns whether the oracle is in the category of *vaticinu ex eventu* (‘speaking after the event’), a genre that treats part of the past as if it were still future as a basis for making a few statements about what the near future will bring” (232).⁵⁵

In my opinion, any Scripture scholar or commentator who would allow “*vaticinu ex eventu*” to be “recognized as a legitimate genre” (232) would be someone who has given up far too much ground to detractors of a traditional holistic approach towards the “authority” of Old Testament prophetic literature.

P 17: “*The Genres of the New Testament Are More Connected to Orality Than Textuality*” (233).⁵⁶ I noted a considerable reiteration of ideas and arguments from propositions 5-13 in the lengthy discussion of P 17, and unfortunately observed the same measure of apparent bias towards orality over textuality as is reflected in the preceding title. As mentioned below, during the NT production era both modes of communication were essential, but not necessarily for the same reasons and during the same periods. I need not rehearse all of my earlier concerns, but will comment briefly on a selection of old, plus a few new issues:

- In arguing for the “preference for orality in the second century” (235), Sandy refers to the assertion by the Roman physician Galen that “learning out of a book was not even comparable to learning from ‘a living voice.’ Nevertheless, in spite of the limitations of written forms he chose to write because it allowed his medical insights to reach a wider audience” (236)—and I might suggest, also prevented others from altering or distorting his notes.⁵⁷ These would seem to be considerable advantages that would apply even more readily to the written texts of Scripture.
- I am not convinced by the evidence that is adduced in favor of viewing Paul’s associates as “coauthors” (238). That he made use of a secretary (*amanuensis*) in the composition of his letters is beyond dispute, but I assume that they made their contribution primarily, if not exclusively with respect to literary (stylistic) form and not apostolic content (240-241; cf. 248-250).⁵⁸
- While it may be true to say that “the Gospels were written primarily for theological rather than historical purposes” (242),⁵⁹ I also see the possibility of people deriving a misleading implication from such a statement—one that disregards or downplays the vital *historicity* of the Gospel accounts.
- “Extensive research on orality is challenging traditional paradigms for how the Gospels were produced. If the transmission of the traditions about Jesus were oral for several decades...and if those oral texts had become substantive rather than single accounts of this or that parable or miracle, then previous attempts to explain the origins of the Gospels needs to be reevaluated” (243). *I am not persuaded: (a) that the alleged “extensive research on orality” has disproved the hypothesis that “the traditions about Jesus” were set to writing in one form or another at a much earlier point in time, arguably even during Christ’s ministry on*

of salvation and retells it in Pauline terms, and more radically than Paul himself” (Robert Coote, “Scripture and the Writer of Mark,” in Weissenrieder and R. B. Coote, 2015:366)

⁵⁵ “[I would allow for] a few early written oracles that actually predicted Jerusalem’s fall (on behalf of a rival party within the Judahite elite) while viewing the majority of the biblical prophecies of doom as later *ex eventu* explanations of the disaster that used the few early oracles as a generic model. Over time these were greatly expanded and adapted” (James M. Bos, *CIAW*, p. 278).

⁵⁶ D. Brent Sandy is the primary author of chapters pertaining to the New Testament (cf. p. 10).

⁵⁷ Perhaps instead of Galen, the Apostle Paul might have been consulted on this point—on the relative importance of writing, e.g., 2 Cor. 1:13-14.

⁵⁸ With regard to the structure of this chapter, it would have been more effective to merge the material in the section “The Composition and Transmission of Paul’s Letters” (248-250) with that of the prior section “Paul’s Letters” (237-241).

⁵⁹ This quote is attributed to Craig L. Blomberg.

earth; and (b) that “oral texts” can become “substantive” to a significant, widespread degree without being directly or indirectly supported by written forms.⁶⁰

- “From Luke’s prologue we learn that he was the recipient of orally transmitted accounts (Lk 1:1-4)” (244). *As I have suggested in the discussion of P 9, I do not feel that the available evidence supports this apparent claim that Luke is referring only to oral texts in his prologue.*⁶¹
- “Since the Synoptic Gospels were anonymous as first compiled, we cannot be certain who was responsible for the composition of the Gospels. ... The author of the third Gospel (traditionally, Luke) tells us that he based his Gospel on oral eyewitness accounts” (247). *However, if Luke, for example, were indeed the author-compiler of the Gospel attributed to him (which we accept), why can he not be regarded as the person “responsible for [its] composition,” using all of the oral and written sources available to him? The general anonymity of orality and oral traditions should not be over-emphasized to the point that people become confused about the reliability of the authorial sources of the eventually composed written texts of Scripture.*

P 18:⁶² “Affirmations About the Origin of Scripture Confirm Its Fundamental Oral Nature” (255). This “fundamental oral nature” of Scripture is explored in the present chapter in relation to the subject of “inspiration” and with special reference to the “two key texts” of “Hebrews 1 and 2 Peter 1” (256). This literary-theological overview is generally quite informative, but once again accentuates the orality, at the expense of the textuality of the Scriptures. For example: “No other text [Hebrews 1] ties together God’s speaking and divine revelation so closely” (257) ... Continuing throughout his sermon, the preacher of Hebrews repeatedly refers to God’s speech” (258). But this reference to divine discourse is always based on exact or paraphrased texts of the Old Testament (probably the Septuagint translation); in fact, most of chapter one is comprised of these quotations. Thus the implication of every verb of “saying/speaking” is undoubtedly also “as recorded/written.”

With regard to 2 Peter 1, it is alleged: “By referring to the prophets, Peter’s purview did not extend to all the authors of the Old Testament. In the context of defending Jesus’ second coming, Peter specifically had in mind prophecy (in support of this, see 1 Pet 1:10-12)” (261). But I do not follow this reasoning; 2 Peter 1:21 appears to be a very general reference, not one that is limited to Christ’s second coming—but indeed, to the entire Good-News message, the “precious promises” (2 Pet. 1:4) about the Messiah that was revealed throughout the OT and expounded by Christ himself, referred to as “a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Pet. 1:19). This Gospel-focused proclamation via oral word and written text is the reference encompassed by 1 Peter 1:10-12 as well. With respect to the notion of divine inspiration then, I cannot see how the following assertion can be maintained either (261-262):

Peter’s point [in 2 Pet. 1:21] was not that the written text of Scripture was inspired. Although that was a consequence, since the messages of the prophets became part of Scripture, Peter’s focus was the precursor to written Scripture. He was affirming the inspiration of the oral proclamation of the prophets.

⁶⁰ Thus I do not entirely agree with the conclusion that “faithful followers faithfully transmitting the oral texts of the Gospels...was the primary means by which the gospel message was preserved and passed on in the early church” (246). With respect to the stability in “preserving” the message (quality), the written text would have been more effective; with respect to the ease and extent of “transmitting” message (quantity), the oral text would have been more efficient.

⁶¹ Sandy may not, in fact, be asserting this (cf. p. 245), but that is the implication which is given after the paragraph-initial declaration that “Oral texts were foundational for the written Gospels” (244).

⁶² The final Part 4 of the book includes propositions 18-21: “Concluding Affirmations on the Origin and Authority of Scripture” (253).

Peter's point rather was *both—and*; “the word of the prophets made more certain” (2 Pet. 1:19; cf. 3:2) has now been communicated to people in oral as well as written form, that is, in both the apostolic message and also the foundational testimonies of the OT prophets. That combined prophetic-apostolic Gospel is also the focus of Peter's words in his first epistle (1:3-12). This is the inspired, authoritative Word of God that all contemporary readers/hearers must seriously “pay attention to” (2 Pet. 1:19) and actively respond to in their lives (e.g., 1 Pet. 1:13-2:3; 2 Pet. 3).

P 19: “*Affirmations About the Authority of Scripture Assert Its Divine Source and Illocution*” (263). This chapter offers a brief but useful overview of the “figurative and emotive language in Paul's letters” (265-267),⁶³ with special attention devoted to 2 Timothy 3:14-17, “Paul's statement about inspiration” (267)—its “context” (267-269) and its “intent” (269-272). The insightful discussion centers on the distinctive term “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*), “which aims at describing the relation between the invisible God and the visible Scripture” (269),⁶⁴ and may be understood in three ways: “it affirms that God is the source of Scripture; it evokes imagery of God's communicative breath or Spirit; and most importantly, it *leads to* [I would prefer, ‘embodies’ or ‘expresses’] the illocution of Scripture's transforming power” (271, my italics). The crucial passage on the nature and purpose of the Holy Scriptures is followed by Paul's command to Timothy to “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2). Sandy feels that “our tendency may be to assume that Paul has the written word in mind, but based on proposition 12 earlier, he is referring to the oral text of God's truth” (272). However, as I explained at that point, I see no reason to restrict the reference of *logos* here; it clearly entails the *written* as well as the *oral* Word of God.

P 20: “*Inerrancy Has Essential Roles and Limitations*” (274). Assuming that “inerrancy is no longer the clear, defining term it once was” (274) in relation to the Scriptures, W&S seek to define it more precisely using a speech-act model in comparison with the closely associated concepts of “inspiration” and “authority” (276-277):

Inspiration identifies the source of the communication and applies to the text (the locution). Whatever interpreters determine the meaning of the text to be, inspiration affirms that the message is embodied in words (*graphê*) that come from God through human communicators. Authority identifies the claim on the reader and applies to our response to those claims. Both inerrancy and authority are inseparably vested in the intentions of the human communicator (an unnecessary qualifier for inspiration). In contrast to both inspiration and authority, inerrancy deals with meaning and can only be discussed in light of the intended illocution; thus it is entangled in interpretation, genre and hermeneutics. This makes it a far more difficult term to manage. Since the concept is founded on interpretation of meaning, its claims relevant to certain contexts can be undermined or subverted if our interpretation is in any way deficient.

This chapter concludes with several sections of thought-provoking “summary points on applying inerrancy”—first, regarding certain “errors of inerrancy advocates” (279); second, concerning corresponding “errors of skeptical scholarship” (280); and finally, with regard to “seven

⁶³ I would suggest a slight revision of this chapter's opening sentence: “Word pictures appear in many places in Scripture, *adding* beauty and power *to* divine revelation” (263, added emphasis). This statement might be wrongly interpreted to mean that literary imagery (“word pictures”) is distinct from theology (“divine revelation”); rather, the revelation includes propositional truth along with figurative appeal and emotive impact.

⁶⁴ Citing J.D. Quinn and Wm. C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 762.

categories to which inerrancy has been applied and which need individual investigation” (280-282): (1) Facts and historical referentiality (people and events), (2) Composition (authorship, dates of books), (3) Text in the autographs,⁶⁵ (4) Doctrine, (5) Propositions,⁶⁶ (6) Revelation (picture of God),⁶⁷ and (7) Interpretive conclusions (young earth, eschatological schemes, theories of the atonement, etc.).⁶⁸

P 21: “*Belief in Authority Not Only Involves What the Bible Is but Also What We Do with It*” (283). W&S assert that “Though the term *inerrancy* describes the nature of Scripture, it was adopted out of a desire to affirm how *we* should then *read* Scripture” (283, original emphasis). With that in mind, their “proposal is that we should be *competent* readers of the locutions, *ethical* readers as we seek to faithfully follow the illocutions and *virtuous* readers with regard to the perlocutions” (284, original italics). The authors offer some instructive observations with respect to each of these three categories. For example, with regard to the first principle, “Our interpretations and conclusions about the Bible’s teaching always carry the qualification that those conclusions only remain sound if we have read [analyzed and interpreted] the locutions competently” (284, words in brackets added). “Ethical readers” must follow “the path set by the communicator’s illocutions to lead to the intended meaning” and “must be guided by the human communicator’s intention...because that is where the authority is” (286), under divine inspiration, I might add.⁶⁹ The qualifier in the category of “virtuous readers” “relates to the perlocution part of the speech act. The bible is offering an encounter with God, and it expects the reader to be transformed as a result. ... Our virtuous lives are the evidence of the vibrancy of our response to God” (287).⁷⁰ There follows a perceptive overview of “the role of the Holy Spirit” (287) in the reading of Scripture: “While the Holy Spirit’s role with the human communicator pertains to the illocution and meaning of the text, his role in inspiration identifies him as the source of the locutions” (288). “The Holy Spirit is thus involved in particular ways with each segment of the speech act” and provides the essential impetus and guidance to enable believers to become “competent, ethical, and virtuous” readers of the Scriptures (289).

⁶⁵ W&S’s observation on this point is worthy of further study and evaluation: In the absence of the “original autographs” of Scripture, “an alternate way of linking the authority of the text to a form that precedes the stage in which we are aware of errors in scribal transmission would be to link the authority of the text to the final canonical form, which was then transmitted as canon. Beyond that it is important to affirm that the locutions have been reliably preserved in the process that led from communication to canon. The term inerrancy cannot, however, be applied to this” (281).

⁶⁶ “When Scripture explicitly offers propositional truth, we can easily affirm the inerrancy of those propositions. We must be more cautious, however, if we are inferring propositions from the text through interpretation” (281). I feel that this distinction will be rather difficult to maintain since all understanding of Scripture, even in cases where we may feel that explicit propositional truths are being affirmed, involves human interpretation.

⁶⁷ “Inerrancy then pertains most importantly to the profile of God, the plight and nature of people, and God’s plan for reconciling them to relationship with him” (282).

⁶⁸ “We must be careful not to confuse our interpretations with the text itself as we discuss inerrancy and authority” (282).

⁶⁹ Similarly, I would want to add the italicized words (perhaps assumed) to this assertion: “A canonical perspective can augment the original communicator’s meaning, but it cannot override the authority vested in that human communicator” (291) *of Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit*.

⁷⁰ I do not think, however, that “the proper response” should be limited to “submission” (287). What about thankful praise and other cognitive, emotive, and volitional reactions?

The discussion of this final proposition (21) concludes with some useful thoughts on “truth and authority” in relation to Scripture. “Whatever we identify as coming with the Bible’s authority is true, but not everything that is true comes with the Bible’s authority” (290). “Truth” pertains to all of the locutions of Scripture by virtue of divine inspiration, but “authority” as it concerns faith and life pertains only to the illocutions of Scripture, for example, *obedience* (perlocution) would be the expected response of any verbally stated (locution) *command* (illocution). In conclusion: “We cannot be content to search Scripture for truth; our search is for that which has authority. ... Scripture contains all sorts of incidentals that carry no authority, though they are true” (290-291).

“*Faithful Conclusions for Virtuous Readers*” (292): In this concluding chapter, W&S summarize, rephrase, and organize the various propositions regarding “ancient literary culture and biblical authority” according to three categories: the first and largest listing incorporates “what we propose is safe to believe within a robust doctrine of biblical authority”; second, “items that we consider inimical to biblical authority”; and last, “questions that we are still pondering” (292). To a great extent I would agree that the authors have admirably achieved the general aim of *The Lost World of Scripture*, which has been “to chart a course through the crucial insights gleaned from ancient literary culture toward a reformulation of biblical authority, and by doing so to strengthen the doctrinal understanding and commitment of evangelicals” (292).⁷¹ During the course of this review article, however, I have repeatedly encountered several issues that I am either not completely convinced about, or which I think might be significantly challenged, depending on how one interprets the available secular as well as scriptural evidence. This difference in opinion is of course for the readers of this review to resolve as they compare the various assertions of this book with my critique. Not surprisingly, most of these same issues reappear in this final, concluding chapter. I have summarized my major concerns in the form of five evaluative statements, each one followed by one or more additional illustrative citations from this chapter, occasionally accompanied by my comments in italics.

1. *The Lost World of Scripture* displays a prevailing tendency to valorize orality and oral tradition at the expense of textuality and the written word in relation to the composition and transmission of the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments.
 - “For at least first-century Christians, it’s likely that written texts were initially perceived to be another stage in the process of transmission of authoritative truth... (Oral texts continued to be preferred into the second century.)” (295).
 - “Since the Old Testament was first oral texts, and subsequent to the oral texts, long-established written forms became recognized as inspired, we may rightly infer that written texts of the New Testament would in due time be recognized as inspired” (301). *I do not believe that it took very much time for the oral texts at the basis of the Torah, for example, to be inscribed in written form—at which point they were immediately accepted as divinely inspired and authoritative by the people of Israel. As for the New Testament texts, the “in due time” indicated above may actually have been “in no time at all,” as the Apostle Peter referring to Paul’s writings clearly indicates (2 Pet. 3:15-16).*
2. The possible influence of comparative ancient secular (pagan) cultures and literary traditions on the development of the biblical literature is rated too highly, and the *sui*

⁷¹ However, I would question W&S’s apparent aversion to apologetics in asking “whether our doctrine of the authority of Scripture has become too enmeshed in apologetics” (306). According to 1 Peter 3:15 I do not see how *apologetics* can be disconnected from *theology*—whether someone happens “asks us to explain the hope that we have” in Christ, or we must defend that message of hope from those who would distort or confuse its origin, form, content, or intent.

generis character of the sacred Scriptures is thereby compromised to a greater or lesser degree.

- “Reference to the material world and cosmic geography always reflects what was known in the ancient world. God’s revelation does not contain any information in those areas that would differentiate their thinking from the rest of the world” (301). *I would argue, on the contrary, that the monotheistic concept of Yahweh and his associated attributes, already well established in the Torah (e.g., holiness, grace, glory, etc.), created a new “cognitive environment” (293) that would (should!) have radically affected Israel’s conception of all “reference to the material world and cosmic geography” (“Old World Science,” 301) that is found in the Hebrew Scriptures.*
 - “Though the literary composition of the books of the Bible may not have differed from that of other documents and literature of the ancient and classical world, the value-added ingredient is God’s self-revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit. ... Whatever overlap there may have been between Israelite traditions and those known from the ancient world occurred primarily at the level of locution” (303). *In addition to the obvious difference in content, I submit that the biblical literature also significantly differs qualitatively in structural and stylistic form (locution) in comparison with the religious literature of surrounding pagan cultures. Undoubtedly, it would take a thorough comparative text analysis to demonstrate this.*⁷²
3. The postulation of a single, more substantially text-contributing, human “authorial-compositional source” for the biblical books is not given sufficient emphasis, that is, in favor of a more evolutionary model of textual development at the hands of a series of subsequent scribes and editors.
- “In ancient literary culture a written work was not necessarily thought of in authoritative terms. ... Reference to...authority figures inside a book or subsequent books of the Bible was not intended to identify them as authors, and therefore our formulation of biblical authority need not be based on that premise” (298).
 - “In the past [*apparently no longer in view of modern scholarship*], the activity of editors or scribes inserting additional material into texts in the process of composition was considered problematic, because such activity could not be connected to the authority figure (formerly considered the author) and brought deviation from the concept of autographs. In other words, any substantive activity by interlocutors (scribes or editors) would undermine the possibility of a text’s authority” (299). *The critical, but ambiguous term “substantive” needs to be carefully defined and circumscribed.*
4. Precision in the wording of transmitted oral and written texts is not viewed as a highly desirable ideal for ancient communicators, even with respect to recognized divinely inspired, authoritative texts.⁷³

⁷² Such a comparative analysis might begin by testing the various assertions and examples provided in *Translating the Literature of Scripture* with samples of other ANE religious texts.

⁷³ “If we heard texts more holistically as they did in the ancient world—since it was rare for individuals then to have access to written texts—rather than reading them like we dissect frogs in a laboratory, we would recognize the limited value of such close readings. As linguistics has taught us, the smallest unit of meaning in most cases is a paragraph. So, yes, incorrect views of inspiration lead to incorrect views of interpretation. When our hermeneutics become atomistic, dissecting a text for every possible nuance of word and syntax, we may miss an author’s real intent” (interview “Inerrancy and the *Lost World of Scripture*: An Interview with D. Brent Sandy” Posted online on [May 16, 2014](http://sharperiron.org/article/book-review-lost-world-of-scripture) by [Jared S. Burkholder @ http://sharperiron.org/article/book-review-lost-world-of-scripture](http://sharperiron.org/article/book-review-lost-world-of-scripture)).

- “As oral texts [of Scripture] were transmitted from one generation to another, the wording and details varied within a degree of variation accepted by the communities passing along the texts” (299).
 - “It is safe to believe that there could be duplicate texts with variation” (300). *But the question I have is this: Was such textual variation simply not considered important, or was it rather a matter of not knowing about it—or not having either the tools or the opportunity to eliminate it?*
5. The laudable attention to literary genre is occasionally overlaid in view of a modern theoretical perspective.
- “We have to understand the narratives of the Bible as literature before we can glean them for history. A narrative has a beginning, a middle and an end; history does not” (301). *I do not recognize this clear-cut distinction between narrative and history in the Bible; in fact, with regard to the Old Testament accounts, they would seem to be more “history” than “narrative,” if a choice had to be made. According to the definition above, the ending of the book of Acts would seem to indicate that it, too, is a historical record.*
 - “The authority [of the text] is vested in the narrator, and we validate by faith his perspectives and selection. Again we find safety in attending to illocution rather than focusing too much on locution. This is truth-telling literature, and we need to discern the truth the narrator is telling even though his methods and conventions may differ from our own” (302). *More precisely, as W&S have also pointed out, a biblical text’s authority is ultimately vested and guaranteed by its divine source, of which the human “narrator” was only a spokesman. Furthermore, I believe that a solid hermeneutical methodology must be founded equally upon the “locutions” of a text as well as its “illocutions,” for the latter are method-logically always contextually and conceptually derived from the former. This is also a crucial theoretical issue because, according to the speech-act model, the entire act—locution + illocution + perlocution—is a unified communicative whole, and one element in the triad, which is source-producer oriented, cannot be divorced from another, as W&S seem to do on occasion in their discussion, either explicitly (e.g., 42-43), or implicitly, when the “source” becomes an anonymous scribal succession (e.g., 63).*

I might underscore in closing one significant *practical* implication of our difference in perspective regarding the composition of Scripture and its transmission—a disparity that is highlighted again in the following quote:

Nor did manuscript culture consider handwritten texts to be an advancement beyond oral texts; they were an extension, not a replacement. Writing was a tool of orality. Texts continued to be embodied in speech. ... A certain amount of variation (according to the limits of a community) was not an issue in oral culture, and the same was true for manuscript culture. Variants were simply endemic to oral cultures as their oral texts took form, and to manuscript cultures as their written texts took form. ... As long as texts—whether oral or written—reliably represented the meaning, no harm no foul. (178-179)

However, if oral variants in the text are just as valid and credible as scribal ones, as the preceding assertions seem to suggest, what are the consequences for the practice of traditional *textual criticism*, on the one hand, and for contemporary *Bible translation*, on the other? How are text critics now to evaluate one variant in relation to another if any or all of the alternatives may originate or derive from unattributed oral sources? And if the source text itself allows for such variation, are translators then free simply to choose the one that suits their preference or the cultural setting in which they are working? Or, to extend what was purportedly the procedure in the times of textual transmission, may they add their own local vernacular variant to the inventory of verbal options—as long as “the meaning is reliably represented, no harm, no foul”?

But in respect of the academic excellence of *The Lost World of Scripture*—its breadth and depth of scholarship with special reference to “the oral culture of the biblical world,” as well as its

manifest evangelical ethos and commitment to the truth, authority, and reliability of the Word of God—it is appropriate to end or review with a citation that I can heartily agree with (309):

We consider God’s empowerment of humans to be a remarkable testimony to how God acts in this world, especially when the accomplishment of much of his divine purposes depends on frail humans. We conclude that under God’s superintendence and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, faithful believers accurately preserved and transmitted the truths that were divinely revealed, even though we cannot know what the exact words were as originally written.

I would encourage all serious students and concerned teachers of the Scriptures to carefully work through the sequence of propositions of this book, critically engage with the various claims made and the reasons given (perhaps in comparison with my own), come to their own studied conclusions, and, in any case, continue to proclaim and promote the remarkable testimony of “how God acts in this world,” especially in and through the oral and written Gospel message of salvation!

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