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ORALITY AND WRITTENNESS IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PROPHECY: Its Effect on Translation as Communication in Latin America

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Introduction¹

What can we say for *sure* about orality, writtenness, and the process of change from one medium to another in ancient Near Eastern prophetic texts? Absolutely nothing! When considering ancient prophetic texts it is extremely difficult to suggest certitudes about the oral origin or oral nature of any given written text that lies before us from the ancient Near Eastern world.

This study attempts to trace the presence of oral features in written prophetic texts. This attempt, of necessity, raises a number of questions that undoubtedly cannot be answered fully within the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the questions need to be posed at the outset. Ever since Milman Parry² and subsequently Albert Lord³ published their studies, there has been an underlying assumption that much if not all of the biblical text began as oral tradition. This assumption has been taken up and treated quite extensively by Susan Niditch in her book *Oral World and Written Word*, where she has argued that “ancient Israelite literacy has to be understood in the context of an oral-traditional culture.”⁴ The questions that arise from these assumptions are many.

1. If it is true that the biblical texts were primarily oral tradition, is it possible to discern oral characteristics or dimensions within these texts?
2. Can a clear distinction be made between oral and written, or might that be an incorrect dichotomy?
3. How can we define an “orally derived text”?
4. When and how did an oral tradition become a written text?
5. Who decided that an oral tradition had to become written text?
6. What kind of power was exercised by those who knew how to write?
7. Is it possible to always distinguish between “oral” and “written”?
8. To what extent were the writers/scribes influenced by an “oral and aural world”?
9. Can we speak of “transitional texts,” i.e., texts that may have been composed with the aid of writing but betray a definite oral style?

1 I wish to thank my wife, Mariel Deluca de Voth, who was very helpful in finding appropriate resources for this study.

2 Milman Parry, “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I. Homer and the Homeric Style,” in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 41 (1930): 73-147. See also part II in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 43 (1932): 1-50.

3 Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 24; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

4 Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 99.

10. Can we assume that “prophetic speech” is quite different from “everyday speech”?
11. Does oral composition always depend on “traditional material”?
12. Can we agree with Herman Gunkel when he affirms that an oral stage of any biblical composition would be poetic?¹

These and many other questions arise when we approach the subject of *orality* and *writtenness* in texts of the ancient Near East.

My purpose is to address some of these questions as they bear particularly upon so-called prophetic texts of the ancient Near East. If indeed Robert Alter is correct when he writes:

Spoken language is the substratum of everything human and divine that transpires in the Bible ...²

it is imperative that we take seriously the questions posed in an attempt to understand the biblical text in a more comprehensive way so that it can then be communicated in a more effective way.

The course of action that I will take is the following. I will first of all address the reality of Mesopotamian prophetic texts that exist outside the realm of the biblical text. There are primarily two areas that merit attention: a) texts that come from the eighteenth century found in the ancient city of Mari; b) texts that come from the seventh century found in the Neo-Assyrian city of Nineveh. These texts along with their process of composition will serve as what might be considered the extra-biblical context for understanding the *orality* and *writtenness* of the biblical prophetic texts. I will then turn my attention to the reality of the highly stylized prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible. In a third section I propose to look at specific prophetic texts and compare them with the translation that we have just finished called *Biblia en Lenguaje Sencillo*. Having done this, I will compare these findings with two more modern realities. One is that of the *payador* in Argentina, who is a poet who improvises and debates with his counterpart using what is called *contrapunto* (counterpoint). And finally, I would like to make some suggestions as to the reality of rap music, as a medium for communication that indeed is quite “oral.”

Prophetic texts in ancient Mesopotamia

When considering prophetic texts from ancient Mesopotamia, one can begin safely by saying that in general, most of its literature was meant to be delivered orally before an audience. Given the highly complex cuneiform writing system employed by the Sumerians and later on by the Akkadians, literacy was not at all common among the population. Therefore, one can assume that any prophetic text began at some point as an oral form of communication.

As best as we can reconstruct the process from the information provided to us by the cuneiform documents present both at eighteenth century Mari and seventh century Nineveh, the origin of the prophetic text always began with an “experience.” That is, a so-called prophet had an experience such as a vision, a dream, or something of the like in the temple. Therefore, it was neither “oral” nor “written.” This experience, of whatever sorts, was then communicated by the one

¹ Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis* (N. Y.: Schocken Books, 1966), 38-39.

² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (N. Y.: Basic Books, 1981).

who had the experience. We can distinguish particularly two kinds of “prophets” in this context. The first one is known as the *āpilum* or *āpiltum*. This term comes from the verb *apālu* which can mean “to answer, to correspond to,” but also can mean “to interpret.”¹ This term most likely corresponds to the Greek *prophetes*, which among other things can mean “the interpreter of the divine revelation.”

The second one is known as the *muhhûm*. This term comes from the verb *mahû*, which generally denotes “to go mad, to fall into a trance, to go into a frenzy.” It can also refer to a state of mental disability. This particular term is used when a Mesopotamian prophet goes into an ecstatic state in the temple and thereby receives a revelation or a communication from divinity.

Now then, if we can assume that prophecy is a particular form of communication, then the Mesopotamian prophet had the responsibility of communicating the message that he received. Most messages that the prophet received in the temple were for the king. Since the king was not always present in the temple when the prophet had this experience, it was the prophet’s responsibility to transmit the message to the king. The prophet had at least two ways of accomplishing his task. He could go to the royal deputy, relay the message to him verbally, and request that the deputy deliver the message to the king. However, by taking this route, the prophet could never be sure that his message would be transmitted faithfully or accurately. A second alternative that was used by the prophet was to write the message. For this, he always needed a scribe who could write out the oral message. Once the message had been written down, the prophet would give the written text to the deputy who would then deliver it to the king. At that point, the king had to have the written text read to him.

In addition to these two main channels of communication, there were others that involved other intermediaries such as temple supervisors, courtiers, etc. It quickly becomes evident that matters of absolute faithfulness, accuracy, transmission of the *ipsissima verba* of the prophet, were not regarded as essential for the communication process. The scribe in the Mesopotamian world, much like in the biblical world, acted not just as a copyist, but as an editor and interpreter of the message. It seems that as long as the spirit of the revelation was present, the communication of the oral message was considered valid.

Given the amount of intermediaries that were involved in the process of transmission of the message, one must not be too quick to draw conclusions regarding the possibility of recovering the “oral features” of any given text. From a distance, and from a western point of view, one immediately questions what, if anything, can be said about the orality of the Mesopotamian prophetic texts that we now can read. I would venture to agree with Cooper. Even though he firmly states that a given literature in Mesopotamia was oral before it was written, he also states:

Similarly, as has been repeatedly pointed out by others, actual Mesopotamian oral literature is what by definition we can never have. Even the most accurate transcription of the performance of a hypothetical Mesopotamian bard would, by virtue of the process of transcription and the decontextualized

¹ W. von Soden, “Dolmetscher und Dolmetschen im alten Orient,” in *Aus Sprache, Geschichte und Religion Babylonians* (ed. L. Cagni and H. -P. Müller; Naples: Istituto universitario orientale, Dipartimento di studi asiatici, 1989), 351-7.

artifact that was its end-product, be something very different than a work of “oral literature”.¹

Even though we can assume and conclude that a given prophetic text from Mesopotamia was originally transmitted in oral form, it would be presumptuous to suggest that it is possible to recover any of the original “orality” of the cuneiform text we have today. On the other hand, it certainly is possible to suggest that oral tradition continued alongside and influenced the written literary texts. So that, one could hypothesize that the written texts we have exhibit “oral” features. Nevertheless, when one considers the role of the scribe, and the different intermediaries involved in the transmission of the prophetic message, as well as the copying process, one immediately realizes that caution is necessary. Being careful not to draw quick conclusions becomes even more critical due to the fact that it has been recognized by many that the written tradition in Mesopotamia had greater prestige than the oral. Hence, the so-called Mesopotamian prophetic texts that were preserved in the king’s register most likely exhibit a significant degree of “writtenness” that mitigates the possibilities of discovering true original orality. In this regard, we might agree with van der Toorn when he states that “words written can never replace words spoken.”²

To conclude this section, I wish to underline that in the case of Mesopotamian prophetic texts we can discern quite clearly the process by which an oral message became a written message. We can also suggest that not much time transpired between the receiving of the oral message, the writing of it, and the delivering of the written message. What we cannot know for sure, is to what extent the written message accurately reflects the oral message due to the abovementioned factors.

Prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible

General comments

I will begin this section with some general comments about orality and writtenness as they can be applied to the biblical text. As I mentioned in the introduction, over the past years there has been an underlying assumption that most if not all of the biblical text at one point existed in an oral form. There can be no doubt that much of the biblical text began as oral tradition. However, it is not advisable to assume that no extant biblical writing originated as written text. Common sense would indicate that it is very possible that many of the canonical writings began as written communication. At the same time, one can also suggest that communication that began in written form, no doubt was influenced by the oral culture in which it was formulated. It is not wise to think that a written text could be so isolated from its oral and aural context.

When considering the Hebrew prophetic texts, I suggest that there are no easy or black and white answers to the question of orality in these texts. One important matter to recognize from the beginning is that literacy was practically non-existent. As many have pointed out, learning in this context was accomplished

¹ Jerold Cooper, “Babbling on Recovering Mesopotamian Orality,” in *Mesopotamian Epic Literature—Oral or Aural?* (ed. Marianna E. Vogelzang and Herman L. J. Vanstiphout; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 105.

² Karel van der Toorn, “From the Oral to the Written: The Case of the Old Babylonian Prophecy,” in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 219.

much more by “listening” than by “reading.” This suggests, among other things, that those who had the ability to write held a powerful tool in their hands. With such a tool, one cannot help but think that scribes in that culture were very instrumental in what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have called *the social construction of reality*.¹ It seems obvious that those who could write texts that in turn were read and listened to as authoritative texts certainly had the power to shape theological/ideological ideas, as well as political and social viewpoints. This is all the more true if one accepts the fact that the written prophetic texts were accepted as the “Word of Yahweh.” In this regard, it is no exaggeration to think of these scribes as those who served as *brokers of divine knowledge*² for most of the population. As such, these scribes not only read the prophetic texts out loud for the general population, but also interpreted these texts for them. Ehud Ben Zvi’s comments are appropriate when he states that:

If this is so, then the written character of the prophetic books implies not only reading, rereading, and study—as well as composition, editing, copying, and the like—among the literati, but also their oral presentation of the divine message and an audience’s aural reception of it. In other words, a written text becomes the starting point for oral communication.³

The last words quoted introduce still another aspect of the issue at hand. At times it has been customary to speak of “orality vs. writtenness” as if the concepts were in competition or in opposition to each other. The evidence gathered from various ancient cultures has demonstrated that this dichotomy is not at all necessary. On the contrary, it seems quite clear that both orality and writtenness co-existed in a very healthy way. For the most part one can speak of an interweaving of both social phenomena. Whereas at times it has been thought that the literary phenomena superseded the oral, it is more correct to see both as complementing and enriching each other.

In this regard, Egbert Bakker’s proposal regarding the reality of both kinds of communications is indeed interesting and worthy of application. If indeed it is possible to discern oral and written features in any given prophetic text in the Hebrew Bible, Bakker argues that it is important to distinguish between medium and conception.⁴ The issue he raises is the following. *Medium* refers to a text being produced in an oral or written form, whereas *conception* refers to a text being conceived in an oral or written form. It is therefore assumed that in an oral culture, a text is usually *conceived* in an oral performance. This text generally makes use of traditional material available in that culture. That traditional material that is available is what Werner Kelber has deemed to call *cultural memory*. The suggestion is that whoever conceives an oral piece has ready access to a shared *cultural memory*.⁵ If this is true, one can readily propose that whoever began the

1 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

2 Ehud Ben Zvi, “Introduction: Writings, Speeches, and the Prophetic Books—Setting an Agenda,” in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 16.

3 Ibid.

4 Egbert Bakker, *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse* (N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).

5 Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

oral tradition that would eventually crystallize into a document which today is called Isaiah (or any other biblical prophet), availed himself of a vast reservoir of memories. It would be somewhat illusory to think that the poets and prophets of the Hebrew Bible did not drink deeply from the well of a rich shared cultural memory.

Based on the distinction that Bakker has proposed, it becomes important to attempt to discover, if at all possible, which prophetic texts might have been conceived in oral terms. It is entirely possible that certain texts originated as “oral conceptions” and then later in time were transmitted either in oral or written form (*medium*). On the other hand, one can also imagine a text being conceived in written form (*conception*) which later was transmitted orally or literarily. The question then becomes, what criteria can we use in order to discover this precise distinction in the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible.

Some have suggested that a distinct characteristic of oral compositions conceived in a primary oral culture is *metaphoric language*. This is posed in contrast to *descriptive language* that is more characteristic of a literate culture that has access to the print medium. An interesting variation of this characterization is one proposed by Havelock who speaks of the oral culture using *imagistic thinking which is action oriented*.¹ This kind of imagistic thinking that is action oriented is certainly very concrete. Consequently, there is very little room for abstract thinking within this framework. This, of course, tends to fit well with what we know about the Hebrew language. Scholars have for some time recognized the concrete nature of this Semitic language.

In this same direction, Farrell has pointed us to Karl Barth’s axiom in which he states that “the Bible is not a philosophic book, but a history book, the book of God’s mighty acts, in which God becomes knowable by us.”² Even though we know that the Bible is not a history book in the modern sense, indeed the Bible is quite concerned with acts. That is why Havelock can propose that the Bible is specially attuned to a primary oral mentality because this kind of mentality is much more action oriented than abstraction oriented.

Case study

Given the general theoretical framework that I have offered in the previous section, I will now turn to specific prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible that were collected by Robert Culley to illustrate his study on orality and writtenness.³ I have chosen his work precisely because he recognizes the reality of *imagistic thinking* and seeks to find images that may point to the orality of a prophetic text. Culley has chosen to look at military imagery that comes through loud and clear in the prophetic texts. This imagery tends to be action oriented and seems to take on a life of its own.

As part of this case study I also intend to compare these texts with the translation known as *Biblia en Lenguaje Sencillo* (BLS). This translation had as its primary goal the *oral comprehension* of the biblical message. Great pains were taken to insure *oral* and *aural* understanding of the text when it was read out loud.

1 Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963).

2 Thomas J. Farrell, “Kelber’s Breakthrough,” *Semeia* 39 (1987): 27-45.

3 Robert C. Culley, “Orality and Writtenness in the Prophetic Texts,” in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 41-64.

Special care was taken with regard to punctuation marks, since these are seen but not necessarily heard. In addition, sentences are generally simple, clear, and concise. Complex sentences with subordinate clauses are avoided. Finally, certain paragraphs are restructured so that they exhibit a more logical and chronological order, at least from a western point of view.

However, as I make the comparison, I am fully aware that direct parallels can never be drawn. The differences that exist in time, culture, geography, purpose, worldviews, etc. are insurmountable. In the final analysis, BLS, though very concerned with orality, is a text that is conceived in writing. Furthermore, it is a translation of a written text that has been written and rewritten more than any of us cares to admit. The editorial and interpretive role of the Mesopotamian scribe pales in light of that of the biblical scribe.

For purposes of organization I will use Culley's categories as he has based these on Isaiah 13.

1. The announcement of an attack: "raise a signal"

Isa 13.2

NRSV: On a bare hill raise a signal

NIV: Raise a banner

CEV: give a signal

BLS: *¡Den la señal de ataque ...*

Jer 51.12

NRSV: Raise a standard

NIV: Lift up a banner

CEV: Raise the signal flag

BLS: *“¡Den la señal de ataque*

In both Isaiah and Jeremiah, the English translations, as well as BLS, have provided the military image of raising a signal. BLS has perhaps given the image a bit more movement and force by placing exclamation marks to help the reader communicate the urgency of the matter. It is worth mentioning that in other texts in Jeremiah and Isaiah the announcement of attack is accompanied by the blowing of a trumpet.

2. Announcement that "the day of Yahweh is near"

Isa 13.6

NRSV: Wail, for the day of the LORD is near

NIV: Wail, for the day of the LORD is near

CEV: Cry and weep!

The day is coming

BLS: *porque el día de su destrucción se acerca*

The same language can be found in Isa 13.9.

Joel 1.15

NRSV: Alas for the day!
 For the day of the LORD is near
 NIV: For the day of the LORD is near
 CEV: Soon the LORD All-Powerful
 will bring disaster.

BLS: *¡Nuestro Dios viene!*
¡Ya está cerca el día!

Joel 2.1

NRSV: for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
 NIV: for the day of the LORD is coming.
 It is close at hand—
 CEV: The judgment day of the LORD
 is coming soon

BLS: *¡Nuestro Dios viene!*
¡Ya está cerca el día!

All translations cited, in one way or another, transmit an image of urgency when mentioning the “day of Yahweh.” In the Isaiah text, BLS clearly tells the hearer that the “day of Yahweh” is a day of destruction. In trying to make the text as aurally clear as possible, it has changed implicit information into explicit information.

3. Darkness

Isa 13.10

NRSV: For the stars of the heavens and their constellations
 will not give their light;
 the sun will be dark at its rising,
 and the moon will not shed its light
 NIV: The stars of heaven and their constellations
 will not show their light.
 The rising sun will be darkened
 and the moon will not give its light.

CEV: Light will disappear
 from the stars in the sky;
 the dawning sun will turn dark,
 and the moon
 will lose its glow

BLS: *Ese día el sol se apagará,*
la luna dejará de brillar
y las estrellas no darán su luz.

The English translations as well as BLS convey the image of darkness. This image is repeated in many other contexts such as Joel 2.2; 3.4; Ezek 32.7, 8; Zeph 1.15; and others.

4. Shaking

Isa 13.13

NRSV: Therefore I will make the heavens tremble,
and the earth will be shaken out of its place

NIV: Therefore I will make the heavens tremble;
and the earth will shake from its place

CEV: I will make the sky tremble
and the earth shake loose

BLS: *Haré que tiemblen el cielo y la tierra*

Jer 8.16

NRSV: the whole land quakes

NIV: the whole land trembles

CEV: makes us tremble with fear

BLS: *y cómo hacen temblar toda la tierra*

Action-oriented language is used in all the translations to transmit the reality of “trembling and shaking.” The concrete image of the unshakeable earth shaking is indeed a powerful one.

5. Anger

Isa 13.13

NRSV: at the wrath of the LORD of hosts
in the day of his fierce anger.

NIV: at the wrath of the LORD Almighty,
in the day of his burning anger.

CEV: am terribly angry—

BLS: *¡Estoy muy enojado y furioso!*

Isa 13.9

NRSV: cruel, with wrath and fierce anger

NIV: —a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—

CEV: In my anger I will destroy

BLS: *Dios está tan enojado*

Though some cultures find it difficult to express God’s anger, the Hebrew poets employed a variety of terms and images to convey the reality of the wrath of God.

6. The people’s reaction to the imminent destruction

Isa 13.7-8

NRSV: Therefore all hands will be feeble,
and every human heart will melt,
and they will be dismayed.
Pangs and agony will seize them;
they will be in anguish like a woman in labor.

- They will look aghast at one another;
their faces will be aflame
- NIV: Because of this, all hands will go limp,
every man's heart will melt.
Terror will seize them,
pain and anguish will grip them;
they will writhe like a woman in labor.
They will look aghast at each other,
their faces aflame.
- CEV: All people will be terrified.
Hands will grow limp;
courage will melt away.
Everyone will tremble with pain
like a woman giving birth;
they will stare at each other
with horror on their faces.
- BLS: *Todos ustedes
se quedarán sin fuerzas,
perderán el valor,
y se llenarán de miedo.
Se retorcerán de dolor,
como si fueran a tener un hijo.
Se mirarán asombrados
y en la cara se les verá el terror.*

Once again the images of pain, of weakness, of terror are very evident in the translations. These are not abstract ideas or thoughts regarding the problem of suffering. These are concrete statements regarding the people's reaction.

7. The subsequent desolation

Isa 13.19-22

This section is too long to quote. However, the translations do convey the image of desolation by listing the kind of desert creatures that will inhabit the beautiful city of Babylon. The real issue is that no human being will live in the city. The image is concrete and action oriented. There is a real sense of urgency and realization that time is up. Desolation and devastation are imminent, and the language used is quite telling.

Given the limited examples offered, one cannot offer comprehensive conclusions. It is possible, however, to suggest some possibilities. First of all, it seems that the repetition of certain key terms is characteristic of an oral style. This does not mean that it cannot be a feature of written style, but it can suggest that oral tradition was behind these repetitions. Secondly, the strong imagery and language would also betray an oral background to these texts. These images most likely are part of a long-standing oral tradition that continues to be used over and over again. Thirdly, the action-oriented language employed would also point in the direction of an oral context that lies behind these texts. It would seem then, that some

preliminary conclusions could be reached regarding the orality of prophetic texts that would have bearing on the translation and communication of these texts.

Perhaps the most significant conclusion that can be reached in light of the evidence from the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible is that the texts as they exist today are written texts that have undergone more than one revision and thus contain a high degree of what might be called “writtleness” in them. At the same time, I believe that we can argue that even though these texts are highly stylized written texts, they betray an oral context. The oral culture continued to have a large influence on the work of scribes at all times. It is in this sense that I suggest that most prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible are “orally derived” texts. Having affirmed this, I also want to caution against “oral dogmatism.” It is certainly possible that some texts that we have were *conceived* as written texts from the very beginning. As such, they would contain other features while at the same time be influenced by the oral culture.

An area that is still in question is when and how the oral texts were written. With respect to the ancient Near Eastern prophetic texts, we have a good degree of evidence that tells how and when these texts were put into writing. But regarding the Hebrew prophetic texts we have absolutely no firm evidence. It is due to this lack of evidence that Susan Niditch offers four hypotheses that in and of themselves rely on orality studies based on other kinds of literature. The four that Niditch offers are:

(1) the oral performance, which is dictated to a writer who preserves the text in an archive, creating a fixed text out of an event; (2) the slow crystallization of a pan-Hebraic literary tradition through many performances over centuries of increasingly pan-Israelite tales to audiences with certain expectations and assumptions about shared group identity; ... (3) a written imitation of oral-style literature to create portions of the tradition; (4) the production of a written text that is excerpted from another written text by a writer who deftly edits or recasts the text in accordance with his own view of Israelite identity.¹

Given the lack of evidence available, I would venture an educated guess and suggest that a combination of options one and four are more likely to have happened with regard to prophetic texts. I believe I can say with reasonable confidence that many of these texts were originally performed orally, and thus were conceived orally. At some point in time—which shall remain I think forever a mystery—that performance was dictated to a scribe. Or, maybe a scribe was present at the oral performance and through some kind of ancient shorthand was able to write down the essence of the oral performance. This I consider the *genesis* of a prophetic text. Option four describes what might have happened to the text once it had been written down. I would add to option four that the recasting of any given prophetic text happened over and over again, until that text was canonized.

With respect to the BLS, one would have to suggest a kind of an inverted process. Those of us who translated, revised, read, and reread the text are part of a literary culture. As such, we are dealing with a text that is written and are in the process of producing another written text. Our task was to reverse the ancient process, not only with the written text that we produced, but also with the source text which may be orally derived, but is certainly a literary text as we know it. The

1 Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 130.

examples that were cited seem to indicate a fair degree of success regarding oral and aural comprehension of those texts in the BLS.

The *Payador* from the Río de la Plata region

The purpose of this section is to analyze a more modern phenomenon from the Southern Cone of Latin America known as the Río de la Plata region. The *payador* is a poet who has not been “sanctified” by the book. He is one who recites or sings his poetry in public in many different contexts. Many of them offer a very difficult art form which is the art of improvising in public. It is in public that the *payador* will improvise poetry that will cover a variety of themes. There is a saying in Spanish that truly reflects the ephemeral nature of this art: “*A las payadas se las lleva el viento.*” It is art in the “present.”

A significant and more difficult art form within the genre of *payadas*, is the *contrapunto*. The *contrapunto* (counterpoint) is the encounter of two *payadores* who oppose each other with their poetry in a most dramatic and improvised form. One will offer a verse of a minimum of four lines and the other will counterattack with another four lines. Some go for 20 lines and are counteracted by another 20 lines and so forth. And it is all improvised!

The themes are many. The inspiration for them comes from both the past and the present. They will deal with the home country, Latin American brotherhood, the gaucho, the Indian, the horse, the fight for independence, love, friendship, the father, the mother, and the children. But in many of them, there is a strong critique of social injustice and they include a proposal for a better world. These can be ironic, dramatic, or even funny. The relationship with the Hebrew prophetic texts should be obvious. I would venture to guess that many of the *orally-conceived* prophetic texts in their pristine state were improvisations. Secondly, the prophetic texts exhibit a strong bias in favor of social justice. Thirdly, just like the Hebrew texts, at some point the *payadas* and *contrapuntos* that were originally totally improvised in public, were written down. The evidence that we have thus far is that people would write them down in leaflets and fliers, and then would distribute them. In this manner an orally-derived text was created that circulated among a small population group. For many years they were shunned by the “literate and literary community” because of their strong “oral nature.” The earliest evidence we have of *payadores* comes from the very late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century.

I will now offer some examples of these improvisations that somehow found their way into a written text. The theme of social justice was one that was developed extensively by a certain one called Hidalgo. He once said:

*que brille en nuestros decretos
la justicia y la razón,
que el que la hizo la pague
premio al que lo mereció,
guerra eterna a la discordia,
y entonces sí creo yo
que seremos hombres libres
y gozaremos el don*

*más precioso de la tierra:
Americanos, unión.*¹

In 1894 two *payadores*, Gabino Ezeiza and Pablo Vázquez, engaged in a *contrapunto*. Some of the verses they improvised are reproduced below:

- GE:** *Está fuerte y muy contento
y de lejos se divisa
que algo le falta al cimienta
como a la torre de Pisa.*
- PV:** *Eso sólo es lo que usted arguye,
es fácil de comprender
de que haya llegado el momento
y que me haga convencer ...*
- GE:** *Que yo lo haga convencer,
hay esta rara emergencia,
si puede usted responder,
pregúntele a la concurrencia.*
- PV:** *He llegado a una creencia
y en su santuario llamé
y allí he encontrado más fuerza
para luchar contra usted.*
- GE:** *Si es que ha encontrado más fuerza
ya varía de opinión,
fuerza puede hallarla ahora
pero no tener razón.*
- PV:** *De que no tenga razón
yo no le puedo objetar
pero no es usted, Gabino,
quien me debe juzgar.*
- GE:** *Yo no le puedo juzgar,
pero no está calculando
de que soy su adversario
y que a mí me está peleando.*
- PV:** *Que yo le estoy peleando
pero con armas muy leales,
usted debe demostrarme
de que sí son desiguales.*
- GE:** *La desigualdad existe,
bien se puede calcular,
que yo improviso ligero
y usted se pone a pensar.*²

¹ Beatriz Seibel, ed., *El Cantar del Payador* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sol, 1998), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 45-47.

There are many telling features regarding this phenomenon. First of all, it is very difficult to find a *contrapunto* that is written down. As the saying goes, “*el viento se los llevó*.” Secondly, whatever has been preserved in writing, can certainly be defined as an orally derived text. As a written text, it is evident that it was *orally conceived*. Finally, the process of how and when it became a written text remains to a large degree a mystery. As to the how, option one offered by Niditch is the most likely candidate: an oral performance that was perhaps not dictated, but copied by some avid fan. These *payadas* and *contrapuntos* provide for us some guidelines as to how to treat oral literature that is indigenous when we try to communicate the prophetic texts through translation.

Orality in rap music—A medium for communication

To conclude this study I will venture into what for me is uncharted territory. For many years I have considered that a key way to communicate the message of the Bible to young people in many parts of the world is through the medium of rap music. As best as I can understand rap, it is a medium that uses semi-spoken rhymes that make use of a rhythmical musical background. It certainly is a style that originates in the African-American culture, but its impact transcends that culture.

Interestingly, there are some parallels between the origins of rap music and the *payador* phenomena in that much of rap developed as a result of verbal games and verbal contests. In addition, much like the *payadores*, these “improvised” verbal games celebrated folk heroes, historical events, etc. Groves Music Dictionary describes this process as follows:

Vernacular traditions had grown out of the valuation of linguistic competence within black American society. These included competitive verbal games such as the “dozens”, which traded humorous and sometimes surreal insults back and forth until one contestant conceded defeat, or the spoken narratives known as “toasts”, often stories about tricksters, folk heroes and historical events. Although the verbal fluency of African-American culture could be traced back to griot, or praise singing, traditions and other lyric forms of West Africa, the style of rapping that developed out of New York HIP HOP was distinctly different for its integration of words and music.

Admittedly, the *payadores* did not resort to insult or to violent language. Nevertheless, I believe that given the oral nature (semi-spoken) of rap and the way it communicates to young people of the twenty-first century, it is worthy of study, consideration, and analysis.

As a first step, I offer a piece based on Isaiah 5 that was composed for rap. It is primarily based on the CEV translation of that chapter.

You're In For Trouble!¹**Diego de Lorenzi and Esteban Voth**

*You're in for trouble!
You take over house after house after house
Until there ain't no room left for us
In the hood, in our lives
I'll make this promise come true
Someone more powerful than you
Will make you pay for what you do
Will make you pay for what you do*

*You're in for trouble!
You keep the party on
You keep the drinkin' on and on
Until your mind gets slow
And you don't care no more
You have played deaf and blind
For too long and too much
Now time has come to pay back
And you will do it in blood
And you will do it in blood*

*You are headed for trouble!
You say wrong is right
You say darkness is light
You accept the bribes to let the guilty go free
You cheat the innocent to death
Bodies cover the streets like garbage
I'm running out of patience
You're running out of time
I'm running out of patience
You're running out of time*

*You're in for trouble
I'm running out of patience
You're in for trouble
You're running out of time*

¹ I wish to thank Diego de Lorenzi who worked with me in composing verse for rap.