Living voice and lifeless letters: Reserve towards writing in the Graeco-Roman world

P J J Botha
University of South Africa

Abstract
This study contributes to the understanding of communication in antiquity by analysing a few specific references to oral and literate traditions in Hellenistic and Christian texts. In the Graeco-Roman world we find a surprising widespread reticence towards writing, varying from mere indifference to active scepticism. The scribal culture of antiquity exhibits a strong bias towards orality, with even literates expressing little confidence in writing. There was a prevailing preference for the 'living voice' in education, and a strong belief that corpora of teaching which were never written down, and could not be written down, distinguished the insiders from the outsiders.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Greeks of classical times considered writing to have been a factor in the development of their civilization. Aeschylus, in his play *Prometheus Bound* (442-470), describes Prometheus' boasting of the gifts he has given mankind:

> Listen to the sufferings of men – how at first they were witless and how then I gave them intelligence and reason....First of all, men looked with their eyes but saw nothing and with their ears listened but did not hear: as if dreaming they muddled through each moment of their

> long lives....They managed all without purpose until I revealed to them the patterns, hard to detect, of the rising and setting of the stars. The use of numbers, best of all knowledge, I invented for them and the composition of letters (γραμμάτων συνθέσεις), how to make them work as memory and mother of the arts....Such were the devices I invented for mankind.

Technological achievements such as agriculture, building, astronomy, mathematics, navigation, medicine, and writing represented cultural progress and social equilibrium in the Greek mind.

Although the Greek world knew writing during the second millennium BCE (archaeological evidence for 1600-1200, Linear B), for various reasons writing fell into disuse, so that by 1100 BCE, like most sections of the Mediterranean world, Greece was without writing. In the Eastern world, three systems of writing developed: Egyptian hieroglyphics, Mesopotamian cuneiform, and the Semitic alphabets. As a result of economic contact the Greeks learned their writing from the Phoenicians during the 8th century BCE (cf Senner 1989:13-14; Cross 1989). Herodotus has this to say on the matter:

> Now the Phoenicians...introduced into Greece upon their arrival a great variety of arts, of which the most important was writing, whereof the Greeks till then had, as I think, been ignorant. At first they shaped their letters exactly like all the other Phoenicians but, afterwards, in course of time, they changed their language, and together with it the shape of their letters.
>
> (*Histories* 5.58)

The practical and effective simplicity that the Semitic systems provided over and against hieroglyphics and cuneiform helps to explain why they spread so far and were adapted to so many languages – that is, if the alphabet should be treated *not* as a unique invention (and there are good empirical and theoretical reasons for assuming that the alphabet was indeed such an invention; see Goody 1983:84-86).

In contrast to other cultures, the Greek alphabet never became the exclusive property of a privileged few who gave it the aura of a sacred mystery, of an obscure and hidden code available only to those in power. Although usually misrepresented in studies of the Classical and Hellenistic world, the role of writing was quite unique in this culture, forming a major factor in what can be identified as 'Hellenism'. Writing (the alphabet) also played a major role in the 'unification' of cultural groups: 'Dialects heard spoken can seem to be different languages; when seen written in a

common alphabet they are revealed as variations of a shared possession' (Kitzinger 1988:406).

About the story of Roman literacy and the use of writing before Hellenistic times very little can be told: we simply know too little (Kitzinger 1988:416-418). The Romans received the alphabet during the same developments that brought writing to Greece, probably during the seventh century BCE, by way of the Etruscans.

Though there is little evidence for the use of writing over the following four centuries, we find from the third century onwards a process by which Greek models took over and shaped Roman literature and its language. With relative suddenness writing achieved a well-defined place and a sophisticated use in moulding the Latin language to Greek literary models.

However, extensive familiarity with books and reading remained characteristic of a rather small group of people (mostly men), so that we must describe the relationship between writing and orality, and the role of writing within this, still basically oral, culture carefully and with more attention to detail.

The Hellenistic age is often defined as a chronological phase in Western history, delimited by certain political developments, such as the conquests of Alexander the Great and the start of the Roman Empire. Clearly, a historical age is determined by much more than a few political events. The Hellenistic age should be characterized by, among many other things, the rise of a particular world-view, a widespread admiration for things Greek and, pertinent to our discussion, a distinctive attitude towards writing and literacy.

In his famous study of oral tradition and transmission, Gerhardsson (1961:196-197) remarks that the writing-down of the Gospels was really an emergency measure which, among other reasons, was due to 'a commonplace which we recognize from elsewhere in antiquity: an attitude of scepticism towards the written word'. He refers to 'the opposition to letters and writing which manifested itself in many cultures at the time when the art of writing was introduced and which lived on, in various ways and in various forms, long afterwards' (Gerhardsson 1961:157). Similarly, Harvey, asking what kind of literary activity would have suggested itself to the authors of the Gospels, in an aside describes the milieu in which the New Testament originated as 'a culture which tended to frown upon the writing of books as such' (Harvey 1976: 189). These remarks call for a more detailed examination of Hellenistic attitudes towards oral and written communication (cf Botha 1990).

2. THE COMPLEX INTERFACE BETWEEN ORAL AND LITERATE TRADITIONS

When we examine rhetoric, education, writing, reading, and recitation in various contexts in Graeco-Roman antiquity, the evidence indicates a society that is still largely oral with quite distinct (in comparison to modern notions) attitudes towards literacy. Hellenistic culture flourished at the same time that a complex relationship developed between oral and written modes of thought and communication.

The study by Lentz about orality and literacy in Hellenic Greece is an important contribution towards understanding the relationship between writing and speech. Lentz (1989) shows how the oral tradition of memory and performance interacted with the written tradition of verbatim preservation and abstract thought, so that each reinforced the strengths of the other. He considers this *symbiosis* as integral to the remarkable accomplishments of all aspects of Greek culture, from education to law, and from philosophy to literature. Hellenic society exemplifies the hypothesis that culture flourishes when differing media are in competition for dominance. Hellenic literature and culture show the effects when differing media interact symbiotically, so that each supplements the strengths of the other.

However, writing, while important to Greek culture, remained in many ways *secondary* to the memory and performance skills of the oral tradition. Also, *extensive* writing and familiarity with texts were the almost exclusive assets of a rather small section of society. This remains true for Hellenistic times, including the first two centuries of the Common Era.

Memory functioned as a dominant partner in many aspects of the culture. Instruction in the schools remained largely oral, with students learning prescribed works by heart. Most students studied grammar for only a short time, many merely learning to recognize the letters that represented the sounds of the alphabet. The singers and reciters of literature remained a vital part of the culture, and performed for purposes of both persuasion and entertainment.

Composition took place orally, and authors recited or dictated works to scribes who put them in writing to preserve them. The character of individuals vouched for the safety of written depositions in court, and the introduction of written evidence did not shorten the time allowed for oral presentations. The Greeks and Romans preferred to hear the witnesses' own testimony and to judge those individuals by the concrete details of their vocal and bodily action.

Writing never completely broke away from the sound of the human voice. Greeks and Romans seldom read written words without speaking them aloud. Silent reading was possible, but the ancients never considered it necessary or desira-

ble to separate compositions completely from their spoken form. Writing was the sign for the spoken word, not its replacement.

Therefore, the proposal that one should refer to the *symbiosis* of the strengths of oral and literate traditions in Hellenism seems to offer an inadequate description of our evidence.

Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) predates Lentz's investigation. This book details the place of writing as the source of Plato's understanding of abstractions, and as a direct influence on the origin of philosophy. Havelock stresses the importance of literacy to the development of Greek philosophy through this awareness of abstractions as reasons for action in daily life. The date for the literate age is set by Havelock at about 450 BCE, and he argues (in recent works, 1982, 1986) for a 'dynamic tension' between the concrete world-view of orality and the abstract thought of literacy.

The exploration offered here does not want to prove orality (or disprove the significance of literacy) for antiquity. 'Orality' or 'literacy' as such does not exist – except if, beforehand one presumes writing to be unchanging and therefore a known phenomenon. What is needed is an extension of investigations concerning the complex interrelationship between orality and literacy during Graeco-Roman times. Part of our failure to come to terms with the peculiarities and subtleties of Hellenistic literature stems from our inability correctly to visualize ancient writing and text production. That failure follows from an unhistorical perspective and disregard for context; when the 'study of inscriptions is severed from the study of inscribing, the study of fixed meaning is severed from the study of the social processes that fix it. The result is a double narrowness. Not only is the extension of text analysis to non-written materials blocked, but so is the application of sociological analysis to written ones' (Geertz 1983:31). It is with a view to repairing that split that this research is devoted, towards a more comprehensive understanding of the Graeco-Roman use of writing, and the context of text production.

3. THE LIMITED EXTENT OF GRAECO-ROMAN LITERACY

3.1 A pre-industrial, predominantly oral world

Various scholars have emphasized that literacy in ancient Greece and Rome was highly oral (Carney 1975:109-110; Havelock 1982:29; Hadas 1954:50-59; Kenyon 1951:20-21). Whatever the expansion of literate consciousness after Aristotle, the fundamental form for the dissemination and transmission of written material remained that of oral reading and recitation (Finnegan 1977:166). A text was something to be vocalized, an aid to memory and a repository for the voice of an author.

To really grasp the limited extent of Graeco-Roman literacy – and consequently the extent of indifference to things written – we should consider a variety of factors, such as technological developments (eye care, communication technology, industry), education (which was a *very* lengthy process, and so available to very few) and social values. When one considers these factors (cf Graham 1987:30-35; Harris 1989; Botha 1992a) one is forced to acknowledge the smallness of the section of these societies that can be called literate. Some could read, even less could read and write, and still less were fluent readers and writers.

Carney (1975:111-112) has provided us with a description of how we should picture aspects of ancient communication.

> A community at a low level of technology has rather low levels of information circulating within it, whereas a society which is highly developed technologically is inundated by communicators' messages. Specifically, traditional societies rely on oral communications and have none of our mass media. Most of their populations are illiterate, whereas industrialization requires mass literacy. Most of their communications are private and person to person, whereas most of the communications circulating in industrialized society are mass-produced and impersonal....In the societies under review...communications percolate out in irregular fashion. If one were close to an important person, he would know far more of what was going on than would another man who was closer to the scene of the action but not well connected.

3.2 'Because they do not know letters...'

This is the formula that was used by a hypographeus (or scribe) when he wrote a subscription for clients who were illiterate. Although a well-documented feature of Graeco-Roman times, the use many people made of another person's ability to write, and the extent and the diversity of contexts in which we find reference to persons being without letters (ἀγράμματοι) are often underestimated.

My first example is a man about whom we know very little. Except for a waxed tablet from Pompeii, a document which was written in 40 CE (see Sbordone 1976: 145-148 for the text), we would not even have known about Annius Seleucus at all. This particular document was written *on behalf of* Seleucus by his slave Nardus because the former 'said that he did not know letters'. What is so striking is that a sum of 100 000 sesterces interest a month is discussed (bear in mind that one sesterce equals the buying power of about R10 today).

Whether Seleucus himself possessed such very large amounts of money, or only had access to such amounts, we do not know. What is clear, however, is that a person in charge of incredibly large sums of money could fit into his society without being literate.

Although wealth is never an absolute guarantee of literacy (and has never been), we have many instances of the Graeco-Roman elite expressing regard for education and literary culture. Consequently, we should surmise that education and literary culture probably had some connotations different from what we would expect, and, conversely, that illiteracy was, at the time, not as great a stumbling block as we like to think it. 'The illiterate person was able to function in a broad variety of occupations, to be recognised as a respectable member of his class, to attain financial success, to hold public office, to associate on equal terms with his literate neighbors' (Youtie 1975b:201).

Equally instructive is a document (*Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 33.2673) from a much later period, the time of the persecution of the Christians under Diocletian (cf Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.2.4-5). The emperor's first anti-Christian edict of February 303 ordered the total destruction of churches. In a declaration dated 5 February 304, Aurelius Ammonius, lector (reader, ἀναγνώστης) of a church in the village of Chysis, now abandoned, stated under oath that the church contained nothing of value. At the end of the declaration a second hand wrote the following: 'I, Aurelius Ammonius, swore the oath as aforesaid. I, Aurelius Serenus, wrote on his behalf because he does not know letters'.

To modern sensibilities it seems shocking that the former lector of a church is said to be illiterate.[1] But writing and reading in Graeco-Roman times functioned as subsets of a basically oral environment: rather restricted and unprestigious crafts, carrying little of the association with wealth, power, status and knowledge that writing eventually acquired. Indeed, we have some evidence indicating that, for some inhabitants of Egypt at least, should they 'be deemed illiterate in Greek [it] held no significance for them, and for some the reputation of illiteracy in Greek, the language of the alien and worldly bureaucracy, may have become a point of pride' (Youtie 1975a:108).

4. PLATO

When we consider Plato, the only Greek philosopher to relate writing to an epistemology, we find him revealing himself to be in the midst of the interaction of oral and written communication media. Plato certainly displays a remarkable conscious-

ness of abstraction; at the same time, he remains indebted to both memory and concrete examples in his discussions of epistemology. He attacks *both* the oral tradition (the poets) and writing.

As a matter of principle Socrates, Plato's teacher, never wrote a word, because he believed in spoken dialogue as the only means of philosophical instruction. According to Plato (*Phaedrus* 275d), Socrates said,

> You know Phaedrus, that's the strange thing about writing which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's works stand before us as though they were alive, but, if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.

In fact, the most famous expression of hostility to writing in Greek literature is found in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Through Socrates' speech, Plato laments the invention of writing (by the Egyptian god Thoth). Socrates quotes Ammon: 'this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practise their memory' (*Phaedrus* 275a2-4). Thus, Socrates goes on to argue, the true word is 'written with intelligence in the mind of the learner, the living and breathing word of him who knows, of which the written may justly be called the image' (*Phaedrus* 276a6-10).

Writing, Plato says, is an intrusion, something inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind that which can only be in the mind. As an artificial contrivance, a manufactured thing, it destroys aspects of the very essence of being human: memory and internal resources. One will get tied up in what is non-living, and end up spurning real thinking. There is an uncanny insight in Plato's discussion: 'If a book states an untruth, ten thousand printed refutations will do nothing to the printed text: the untruth is there for ever' (Ong 1986:27).

These protests are set in the context of a debate about 'written speeches', and as the dialogue develops it becomes clear that Plato's real concern is with the difference between oral and written *teaching*. The dialogue appears to have been triggered by the appearance of technical textbooks, such as Anaximenes' *Rhetoric against*

Alexander. Plato also knows of medical textbooks (*Phaedrus* 268a-b) and of textbooks which claim to impart the rules for composition (speeches and tragedies). He argues that knowledge gained in this way is totally insufficient for the acquisition of the whole art of rhetoric and wisdom. What is gained is merely some knowledge that is a necessary preliminary (*Phaedrus* 269).

What Plato is rejecting is the belief that a book can be a passport to a kind of 'instant' skill. He himself wrote not systematic treatises but dialogues, preserving the Socratic tradition of 'enquiry'. Books are deficient as teachers, fit only to be used as 'reminders' of what is already known.

> What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory....it shows great folly...to suppose that one can transmit or acquire clear and certain knowledge of an art through the medium of writing, or that written words can do more than remind the reader of what he already knows on any given subject.
>
> (*Phaedrus* 275).

In the *Phaedrus* Plato disparages writing and its use as a substitute for 'live' oral teaching. Yet Plato wrote extensively, and it is only because he did so that we know anything of Socratic or Platonic philosophy. He wrote in the form of dialogues, preserving to some degree the active, living relationship between teacher and student.

One of the basic tenets of Platonic philosophy, namely the theory of Forms or Ideas, derives, consciously or unconsciously, from the perception of the relationship of written words to their referents. For Plato, the reality that we perceive is much too imperfect to be the really real; there must be a True Reality (the world of ideas) of which what we experience is but a reflection. Accordingly, knowledge is always only a reflection, a memory, of the ultimate, unchanging Forms/Ideas, as good writing is a reflection of living speech. Writing provides Plato with a metaphor of something that can always and only be a reflection of something else and is thus incomplete.

The complexity of Plato's relationship to writing really comes to light in his *Seventh Letter*. Here we read first that Plato himself has never written anything and will not write anything on his true philosophy.

> No writing by me concerning these matters exists or ever will exist. This knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other branches of learning; only after long partnership in a common life devoted to this very thing does truth flash upon the soul, like a flame

> kindled by a leaping spark, and once it is born there it nourishes itself thereafter.
>
> (*Seventh letter*, 341c-d).

The fixed nature of a written text makes it unsuitable for expressing the deepest perceptions of reality (*Seventh letter*, 342-343).

> That is why any serious student of serious realities will shrink from making truth the helpless object of men's ill-will by committing it to writing. In a word, the conclusion to be drawn is this; when one sees a written composition, whether it be on law by a legislator or on any other subject, one can be sure, if the writer is a serious man, that his book does not represent his most serious thoughts; they remain stored up in the noblest region of his personality. If he is really serious in what he has set down in writing then surely not the gods but men 'have robbed him of his wits'.

The *Seventh Letter* moves beyond a contempt for writing as an inferior substitute for teaching to a total rejection of writing as a medium of expression for serious philosophy. Plato sets up a firm divide between the few insiders and the many outsiders, in line with the intellectual exclusivism of his other writings (cf *Seventh Letter*, 312-314). Thus there is a firm divide between the mass of Plato's thought, which is publicly set out in the dialogues, and his 'deepest thoughts' which are never written down. There is an 'unwritten doctrine' which is distinct not only from Plato's other teaching but also from 'all other sciences'.

The two attitudes evident in Plato are a fair representation of much of the Hellenistic attitude towards writing. There was a widespread preference for the 'living voice' in education, and also a strong belief that a distinct body of teaching - which is never written down, and cannot be written down (constituting a body of secret lore different in content from what appears in writing) - distinguishes the insiders (the true believers) from the outsiders.

5. PAPIAS OF HIERAPOLIS

A well-known expression of prejudice in favour of the 'living voice' is found in a remark in Papias' *Exposition of Sayings of the Lord* (as quoted by Eusebius): 'For I did not imagine that things out of books would help me as much as the utterances of a living and abiding voice' (*HE* 3.39.4).

Papias' words demand a context – the original literary and genetic context is irrecoverably lost – so we need to turn to the social and cultural context in which these words made sense.

5.1 A common proverb

Papias' phrase is closely echoed in a passage written by Galen, in the opening paragraph of his *Treatise on the preparation of medicine*: 'There may well be truth in the idiom current among most craftsmen (τεχνιτῶν), that reading out of a book is not the same as, or even comparable to, learning from the living voice' (*De compositione medicamentorum secundum locum*, 6.1).

Not only is Galen using the exact phrase of Papias, 'from the living voice' (παρὰ ζώσης φωνῆς) but he is pointing to the given nature of the phrase: a saying or proverb in current use.

We have, in fact, various allusions to the importance of the 'living voice'. Quintilian tells us that 'the living voice, as the saying goes, provides more nourishment' (*InstOrat* 2.2.8) and Pliny writes that 'the living voice, as the common saying has it, is much more effective' (*Letters* 2.3).

Quintilian is referring to a rhetorical school, and the contrast is between giving pupils declamations to read, and giving them a live performance from the teacher. Pliny is urging a friend to come and listen to an orator rather than read at home out of books. In both cases the phrase is mentioned to be proverbial (*ut dicitur*). Written speeches do exist, but their use is deprecated. The stress is on the primacy of the live performance of a declamatory show.

Galen's reference comes in the context of learning medicine, the practical problems of identifying herbs. Texts should not be used outside a teaching situation; like other technical studies, teaching should preferably learned from a teacher and practical experience. In this sense the living voice is promoted: book learning cannot possibly be a match for it.

Although conclusions must be tentative, we can detect a cultural assumption of the first and second centuries that the production of a book was not an inevitable - or even necessarily a desirable - end in itself: books are secondary to oral teaching. 'However, you will gain more from the living voice and from sharing someone's daily life than from any treatise (Seneca, *Letters* 6.5 – advice given after a promise of sending books to Lucilius, *Letters*, 6.4).

5.2 The living and remaining word

Papias, as far as we can determine, was no philosopher. He had a few really weird ideas, and appears to have been a Christian teacher, but not necessarily an educated one, although he does display some rhetorical skill (cf Schoedel 1967:91).

He probably quotes current wisdom in his reference to the living voice. Papias' concern is with teaching and with the passing on and preservation of authentic tradi-

tion. He expresses scepticism about the efficacy and value of written traditions. Written texts are secondary and subordinate to oral instruction and traditions. The living voice of the teacher has priority, even when written material is available:

> And I shall not hesitate to supplement (συγκατατάξαι) the traditions with what I learnt well from the elders, for of their truth I am confident...but if by chance someone should come who had actually learned from (παρηκολουθηκώς) the prominent leaders I examined their words (what Andrew, Peter, Philip..., disciples of the Lord were saying). For I did not imagine that things out of books would help me as much as the utterances of a living and abiding voice.
>
> (Eus *HE* 3.39.2-4)

6. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Clement of Alexandria is a philosopher, and he knows Platonic philosophy. He quotes not only the *Phaedrus* but also the *Second Letter*. He is the author of various writings, but at the beginning of his *Stromata* (Miscellanies of Christian Teachings) we find an elaborate defence for writing the book. 'Now this treatise is not a carefully composed piece of writing for display, but just my notes stored up for old age, a remedy against forgetfulness, nothing but a rough image, a sketch of those clear and living words which I was thought worthy to hear, and of those blessed and truly worthy men (*Str* 1.11.1; cf Eus *HE* 5.11.3).

Although Clement felt no need to justify his other works, the particular exercise of forming and committing to writing the 'Christian philosophy' of the *Stromata* caused him to explain his actions. In other words, we witness a sort of esoteric conception of teaching. Clement's chief concern is above all 'the justification of teaching through writing' (Osborn 1959:34). The *Stromata* are a record of teaching aimed at the preservation of 'true tradition'.

He tells us that the notes he is writing are a kind of sketch of words and people. These people maintained the true tradition of blessedness in their teaching, handed down from father to son, from Peter, James, John and Paul. It is a touching picture of the intimacy of the early church (Ferguson 1974:109). But the revelation (of divine secrets) is to the few. The sacred secrets, like God, are entrusted to word (λόγος), not to writing (*Stromata*, 1.13.2). This is a clear assertion of the limitations of scripture. It also indicates the importance of oral tradition in the Christian movement.

The stature of the oral tradition as the normal method of teaching (and transmitting) the Christian faith is beautifully illustrated by a remark by Justin: 'Among

us you can hear and learn these things from those who do not even know the letters of the alphabet – uneducated and barbarous in speech, but wise and faithful in mind – even from cripples and the blind' (1 *Apol* 60.11).

Clement omits some matters for which his 'readers' are not ready: 'So that others won't think we are giving a sword to a child' (*Stromata*, 1.14.3). He himself is guided by special knowledge. Truth itself is veiled, and his *Miscellanies* so presents it; oral teaching is the only way of knowing the veil, and uncovering truth. Written words of necessity need help (*Stromata*, 1.14.4).

Christianity, with 'truly sacred mysteries', offers pure light and a vision of the one God (Clement, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 12.120). This secret side of worship can by definition not be made known, but Clement does give away a lot of *other* mysterious religious practices: *symbola* and traditions that deserve our careful attention in order to understand the secret, oral traditions closely guarded by the ancients.

Clement is very much a man of his times. Graeco-Roman culture was permeated with the concept of secrecy. At one end of the social scale in antiquity were the *arcana imperii*, the secrets of the imperial government known only to the emperor and his confidential advisors/supporters. At the other end were the secret societies of the slaves whose members made themselves known to each other by inconspicuous signs and passwords. Within the world of free men secrecy was omnipresent: in political activities, in business, in the crafts and professions.

Pagans described Jewish religious practices as mysteries (e g Plutarch, *Mor* 7.1-3), and they themselves participated in innumerable mystery cults. Part of religion (or what was beyond religion) was magic, which was practised by almost everyone. Philosophical schools, usually closed to outsiders, had their secret traditions taught and transmitted by means of speech.

The disgust felt for making public one's secrets through writing is nicely illustrated by the author(s) of 1 Enoch:

> After this judgment, they shall frighten them and make them scream because they have shown this (knowledge of secret things) to those who dwell on earth. Now behold, I am naming the names of those angels! These are their names:....The fourth is named Pinem'e [Penemu], this one demonstrated to the children of the people the bitter and the sweet and revealed to them all the secrets of their wisdom. Furthermore he caused the people to penetrate (the secret of) writing and (the use of) ink and paper; on account of this matter, there are many who have erred from eternity to eternity, until this very day. For human beings are not created for such purposes to take up their

> beliefs with pen and ink....Death, which destroys everything, would have not touched them, had it not been through their knowledge by which they shall perish....
>
> (1 Enoch 69:1-11; Isaac 1983:47-48)

7. NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS?

When forming impressions of Graeco-Roman cultural attitudes we should beware of relying on a small literary elite. This is a point that MacMullen often makes (e g 1981; 1984) - a perspective he describes as seeing all head and no body. It is with this reminder that we should understand negative references to oral tradition in antiquity. Cicero, in one of his letters to Atticus, exclaims: 'Where are those who talk about the living voice? I got a much better idea from your letter than from his talk about what was going on...' (*Letters to Atticus* 2.12).

The remark follows from comparison of a verbal report of some news with a letter referring to the same. Cicero clearly affirms the fact that high regard for oral tradition was quite widespread (*ubi sunt qui aiunt* ζώσης φωνῆς), but that he felt himself – at least in this one instance – at odds with this sentiment. But then Cicero was indeed quite at odds with most of his fellow men and cultural times. Not only was he a senior consular, but also highly educated: a critical literate. However, and very interestingly, in the *same* letter Cicero writes: 'My curiosity is insatiable: but I have no complaint at your omitting to write about the dinner. I would much rather hear it by word of mouth.'

Seneca also expressed reservations about oral tradition: 'Why, after all, should I listen to what I can read for myself? "The living voice", it may be answered, "counts for a great deal". Not when it is just acting in a kind of secretarial capacity, making itself an instrument for what others have to say' (*Letters* 33.9).

Seneca is here arguing for a sophisticated attitude towards philosophy. Instead of merely memorising Zeno or Cleanthes, one should be able to think and teach for oneself. 'Assume authority yourself and utter something that may be handed down to posterity' (*Letters* 33.8). If the living voice is merely a means of passing on tradition, then a book can do as well: 'Let's have some difference between you and the books!' (*Letters* 33.9).

Once again we see the general high regard for oral tradition, but also how a highly educated philosopher, explicitly claiming to be literate, realizes the limitations of oral teaching. Books are indeed of secondary importance, but making oral tradition into a vehicle for mere memorization and transmission would make it simi-

lar to writing: one would be 'dependent on some original and constantly be looking to see what the master said' (*Letters* 33.9).

Also, the uses of communication media are fluent and dynamic. The mere existence of written traditions influences and changes attitudes. It is quite possible that both Papias and Clement reflect tensions within early Christianity. The Christian movement was entering a 'scholastic' phase during the second century - the process of defining its canon of 'prescribed texts' from which all future Christian teaching would be derived - and probably simultaneously engaged the process of suppressing the 'living voice' of developing tradition (as exhibited in Montanist prophecy or in the Gnostic gospels).

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Discussions of orality and literacy in the Graeco-Roman world must consist of both broad, theoretical issues and consideration of specific evidence. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of attitudes toward writing in antiquity by analysing a few specific instances.

How the possibilities of writing are developed by a society depends on many factors, such as the social structure and values of the people employing the script. With regard to these factors we can conclude that a preference for orally transmitted teaching was widespread in Hellenistic times and in the Roman empire. This preference, as is well known, is also common in the rabbinic academies, which shows to what extent early Judaism truly reflects its character as an instance of Graeco-Roman culture – an example of the 'great similarities between the methods, behavior, practices and notions prevalent among Jews and gentiles alike' (Liebermann 1962:193).

This oral teaching tradition was recognized to have a higher authenticity-value than written texts, even though it was constantly updated and amended in the light of practice and changing circumstances. Oral tradition and oral mentality pervaded Graeco-Roman culture.. Writers could rely on the matrix of the teaching situation to expand and explain the text. The role of the teacher, the 'living voice' was crucial.

In scribal culture we find a commitment to the give-and-take of small-group dialectic (interaction). To such a commitment written documents are closed systems, one-way discourses, which are totally inappropriate to teaching and transmission of life's traditions. Writing, though useful for certain things, is the antithesis of the movement and experience of life itself.

In the instances that we have looked at we have found a general reticence towards writing, varying from mere indifference to active scepticism. The scribal

culture of antiquity seems to exhibit a strong bias towards orality, and little awareness of a *dichotomization* between the spoken and the written. The written was not set up over and against the spoken (as we moderns with our heavy literacy bias do), but the written was rather seen as an extension of speech. Even 'literates' (people making extensive use of texts) often had little confidence in writing as a substitute for oral communication.

Finally, a few brief remarks to indicate how I percieve the implications of this study. Although the fact of oral tradition, and its importance, are generally acknowledged, both the extent and importance of the oral teaching tradition in antiquity are still underestimated by many scholars. We really need to re-learn how to 'read' our texts, with an explicit awareness of the all-pervading presence of orality and oral tradition. One consequence of such an awareness is easy to spot. It leads to a different attitude to our manuscripts and textual criticism, and the whole concept of an 'original' version needs re-evaluation (Botha 1992b).

Another implication is, if history is of any importance to our religious reflection and theologizing, that concepts of authority and the use of scripture need to revised. In view of the above, I think that we should move from a *doctrine of scripture* to a more comprehensive *theology of tradition*.

By realizing how impoverished our conventional perception of tradition has become we also become conscious of the plight of our infatuation with things written, and learn to value the living and abiding voice of our fellow humans.

Endnote

1. Both Rea (1968:107) and Youtie (1971a:163) suggest that Coptic Christians are involved here, and consequently that Ammonius could only read Coptic. But we do not know, and it remains remarkable that Ammonius knows Greek - he is simply ignorant of letters (μὴ εἰδότος γράμματα). Either way, a remark by Youtie (1971b:259) concerning the so-called 'slow writers' probably also applies here: 'With these people we move through a vague area between literacy and illiteracy, a rough frontier obscured by contradictions and evasions'. The (somewhat bizarre) notion of a church clerk being completely illiterate is not all that unique in late antiquity (see the discussion by Clarke 1984). What we should surmise the situation to have been is probably that memorization played a major role in the transmission of traditions, even in what were considered to be 'readings'.

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