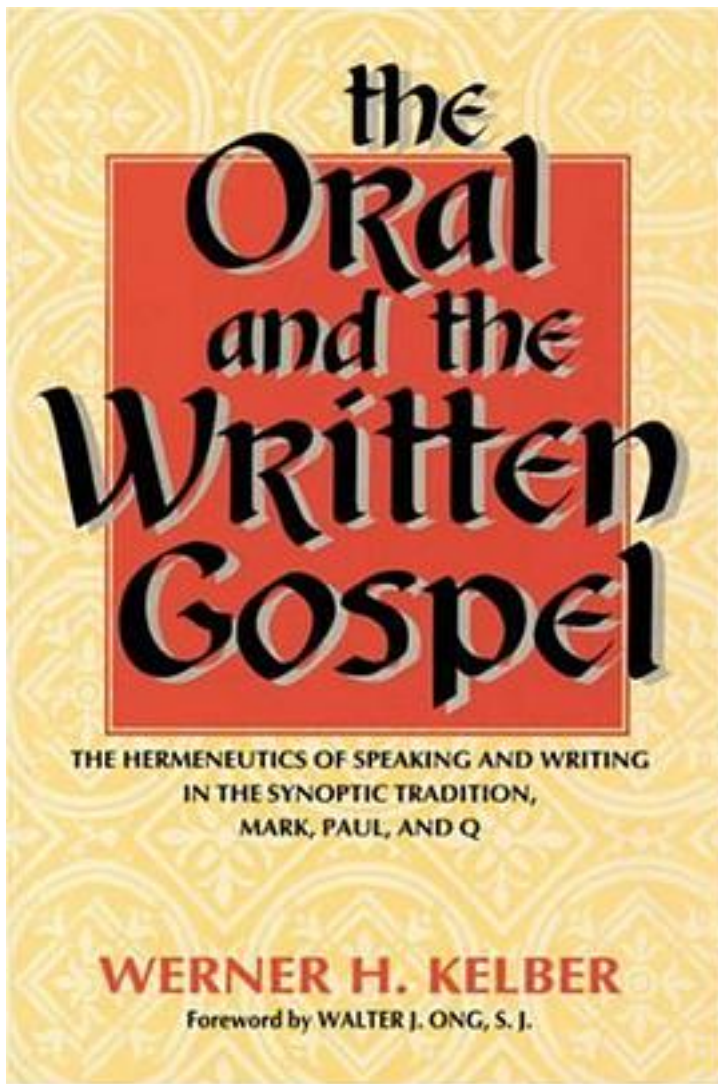


The Oral and the Written Gospel



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"The Oral and the Written Gospel" touches on sensibilities normally left untouched by literary criticism. What happens when speech turns into text? Spoken words, operating from mouth to ear, process knowledge differently from writing, which links the eye to the visible, but silent letters on the page. Based on this premise, Kelber discusses orality and writing, and the interaction between the two, at strategic points in the early Christian traditions. In digressing from conventional literary criticism, the book offers new, and often startling insights into the origins of Christianity. In reappraising scholars' literary propensity to trace trajectories of Jesus sayings back to the assumed original saying, the author argues that in the oral medium each rendition of a saying is the original. Orality works with a plurality of originals, rather than with single originality. Spoken language, moreover, consists in discrete speech acts which are separated by intervals of non-speaking. The behavior of speech, in other words, does not live up to the spatial model of linearity. Kelber suggests a paradigm of oral transmission, which is multidirectional more than strictly evolutionary. Exploring Paul from the perspective of orality and writing, the author argues that the apostle's fundamental disposition is toward an oral hermeneutic. A distinct partiality toward the spoken word pervades his treatment of faith, obedience, gospel, and justification. Language also, Kelber proposes, lies at the root of Paul's aversion to the Law. In breaking with an established exegetical convention, which saw Paul denouncing the legal identity of the Law, the author finds Paul's objection directed to the written or grammatical authority of the Law. In what may be the most extraordinary thesis of the book, Kelber argues that the written gospel is related more by contradiction than by evolutionary progression to what preceded it. Rather than viewing Mark's gospel as the natural end product of antecedent traditions, he explains it as harsh repudiation of the earliest carriers of Jesus' message.

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