“Secondary Orality” in the Gospel of John:
A “Post-Gutenberg” Paradigm for Understanding
the Relationship between Written Gospel Texts

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“Written Text, Orality, Collective Memory”¹ and the Gospel of
John—Some Implications from John 20:30–31

All three ancient media categories, written text, orality, and collective mem-
ory, are of crucial importance in understanding the Gospel of John as a written
document that recounts its special version of the Jesus story in early Chris-
tian literature.² Although I am not completely convinced by all her answers,
especially regarding the “oral style” of the Johannine narrative,³ Joanna Dewey
seems to be right in claiming that “an understanding of the oral world in which
FG [the Fourth Gospel] was produced may help us answer ... questions about
its composition history and the Johannine Jesus tradition.”⁴ The phenomenon
of “secondary orality” is part of such a Johannine oral and literal milieu.

The Johannine narrative describes itself as a written book that has access to
collective memory and its oral stories (John 20:30–31):

30 Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν σῶν καὶ ἄλλα σημεῖα ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐνώπιον τῶν μαθητῶν
[αὐτοῦ],
ἀ δ οὐκ ἐστὶν γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ:

¹ This is a revised version of the title of the Amsterdam NOSTER conference “History, Orality,
and Collective Memory. A New Paradigm for the Study of Early Christianity?” in October 2009,
where I presented an earlier version of this paper. I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Bert Jan Lietaert
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at the University of Pretoria, South Africa (12.8.2013). I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Geert J. Steyn
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of this paper was read at an academic ceremonial honoring Prof. Dr. Johannes Beutler, s.j.,
on the occasion of his 80th birthday (3.10.2013).
² Cf. the important introduction to the problem by J. Dewey, “The Gospel of John in Its Oral-
Written Media World,” in Jesus in Johannine Tradition (ed. R.T. Fortna and T. Thatcher;
Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 239–252; cf. also T. Thatcher, “John’s Memory Thea-
Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.\(^5\)

ταῦτα δὲ γέγραπται

ἵνα πιστεύσητε

διὶ Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ,

καὶ ἵνα πιστεύοντες ζωὴν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ ὄνοματι αὐτοῦ.

But these are written

so that you may come to believe

that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,

and that through believing you may have life in his name.

(a) Using the verb “to write” (γράφω) and the noun “book” (βιβλίον), it becomes evident that the Gospel of John wants to be understood as a literary entity which claims—in the light of Pilate’s “what I have written I have written” (ὃ γέγραφα, γέγραφα; John 19:22)—finality and authority that serve a certain aim, in order to foster belief in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Klaus Scholtissek, among other scholars, concluded that, by this remark, the Gospel places itself among Scripture or maybe even aims to replace (Jewish) Scripture.\(^6\)

(b) At the same moment, John 20:30–31, which forms the end of a first edition of the Gospel of John, opens a view towards an oral environment of the Gospel and the world of its collective memory: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples.” The two adjectives πολλά and ἄλλα refer to (possibly oral) traditions beyond the content of the Johannine “book”: they refer to “many other” signs,\(^7\) so that John 20:30 points to more stories

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5 All English translations of the Gospel of John are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.


7 “Signs” (σημεῖα) is a term that is mostly used in John for miracles performed by Jesus and