

Oral and Written Aspects of the Emergence of the Gospel of Mark as Scripture

Richard A. Horsley

Jewish and Christian, and especially Protestant Christian, emphasis upon the sacred book and its authority have combined with scholarly interests and techniques, as well as the broader developments in the modern West . . . to fix in our minds today a rather narrow concept of scripture, a concept even more sharply culture-bound than that of “book” itself.

—William Graham (1987)

Mark’s Gospel . . . was composed at a desk in a scholar’s study lined with texts. . . . In Mark’s study were chains of miracle stories, collections of pronouncement stories in various states of elaboration, some form of Q, memos on parables and proof texts, the scriptures, including the prophets, written materials from the Christ cult, and other literature representative of Hellenistic Judaism.

—Burton Mack (1988)

It was not necessary that the Gospel performer know how to read. The performer could learn the Gospel from hearing oral performance. . . . It is quite possible, and indeed even likely, that many Gospel performers were themselves illiterate. . . . It was certainly possible for an oral performer to develop a narrative with this level of structural complexity. . . . In Mark the number of interconnections between parts of the narrative are quite extraordinary.

—Whitney Shiner (2003)

The procedures and concepts of Christian biblical studies are often teleological. The results of the historical process are assumed in study of its early stages. Until recently critical study of the books of the New Testament focused on establishing the scriptural text and its meaning in the context of historical origins. Ironically that was before the texts became distinctively authoritative for communities that used them and were recognized as Scripture by

established ecclesial authorities. Such teleological concepts and procedures obscure what turn out to be genuine historical problems once we take a closer look.

How the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of Mark, came to be included in the Scriptures of established Christianity offers a striking example. On the earlier Christian theological assumption that Christianity as the religion of the Gospel made a dramatic break with Judaism as the religion of the Law, one of the principal questions was how the Christian church came to include the Jewish Scriptures in its Bible. We now see much more clearly the continuity of what became Christianity with Israel. The Gospels, especially Matthew and Mark, portray Jesus as engaged in a renewal of Israel. The Gospel of Matthew is now generally seen as addressed to communities of Israel, not “Gentiles” (Saldarini 1994). And while Mark was formerly taken as addressed to a “Gentile” community in Rome, it is increasingly taken as addressed to communities in Syria that understand themselves as the renewal of Israel (Horsley 2001).

Far more problematic than the inclusion of the Jewish Scripture (in Greek) is inclusion of the Gospels in the Christian Bible. The ecclesial authorities who defined the New Testament canon in the fourth and fifth centuries were men of high culture. The Gospels, however, especially the Gospel of Mark, did not meet the standards of high culture in the Hellenistic and Roman cultural world. Once the Gospels became known to cultural elite, opponents of the Christians such as Celsus, in the late second century, mocked them for their lack of literary distinction and their composers as ignorant people who lacked “even a primary education” (*Contra Celsum* 1.62). Fifty years later, the “church father” Origen proudly admitted that the apostles possessed “no power of speaking or of giving an ordered narrative by the standards of Greek dialectical or rhetorical arts” (*Contra Celsum* 1.62). Luke had asserted, somewhat presumptuously perhaps, that he and his predecessors as “evangelists” had, in the standard Hellenistic-Roman ideology of historiography, set down an “orderly account” of events in the Gospels. Origen, who knew better, had to agree with Celsus that the evangelists were, as the Jerusalem “rulers, elders, and scribes” in the second volume of Luke’s “orderly account” said about Peter and John, “illiterate and ignorant” (*agrammatoi kai idiotai*, Acts 4:13).

Nor would the Gospels, again especially Mark, have measured up as Scripture on the model of previous Jewish scriptural texts. The Gospels stand in strong continuity with Israelite-Jewish cultural tradition; indeed they portray Jesus and his followers as its fulfillment. Yet they do not resemble any of the kinds of texts included in the Jewish Scriptures or other Jewish scribal compositions, whether books of Torah (Deuteronomy), books of history (Judges; 1-2 Kings), collections of prophecies (Isaiah, Amos), collections of instructional wisdom (Proverbs 1-9; Sirach), or apocalypses (Daniel). Rather the Gospels tell the story of a popular leader they compare to Moses and Elijah who focused on the concerns of villagers in opposition to the political and cultural elite and who was gruesomely executed by the Roman governor.

Consideration of the *oral and written* aspects of scripture may be one of the keys to addressing the question of how the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of Mark, became included in the Bible by the ecclesial authorities of established Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. Only contemporary with or after the Gospel’s official recognition as part of Scripture do we find Christian intellectuals producing commentaries that are more than spiritualizing allegories or moralistic homilies on Gospel passages. Research in a number of interrelated (but often separate) areas is coalescing to suggest that the Gospel of Mark developed in a largely oral communication

environment and was performed orally in communities of ordinary people in ever-widening areas of the Roman empire, such that it became *de facto* authoritative and revered among Christian communities. In both the situation of the Gospel's origins and the circumstances of its regular recitation, written texts were known and respected as authoritative. Recent research suggests that it was through repeated oral performance that it gained wide authority among the people as the basis on which it was included in the Bible.

Evidence for both the written and oral functioning of the Gospel of Mark is fragmentary and often indirect. Yet there may be sufficient evidence to consider the following oral and written aspects of the emergence of the Gospel of Mark as scriptural:

- the Gospel's relation to Scripture in comparison with scribal cultivation of Scripture
- the predominantly oral communication environment (and oral-memorial cultivation of Israelite cultural tradition) in the Gospel's origin among ordinary people
- the oral (in relation to the written) cultivation of the Gospel in the second and third centuries prior to its official inclusion in the Christian Bible
- the features of the Gospel that made it memorable and performable
- the Gospel's resonance with hearers in historical context

An appropriate preface to these steps is to note the loosening grip of print culture on scriptural studies.

Loosening the Hold of Print Culture on the Concept of Scripture

The concept of Scripture assumed in standard Jewish and Christian biblical studies is problematic as well as narrow because it is so deeply embedded in the assumptions of modern print culture. Only recently have a small number of biblical scholars begun to "catch on" to the ground-breaking research and analysis of colleagues such as William Graham, on the oral as well as written functioning of the Qur'an and the Bible, and Werner Kelber, on oral and written aspects of New Testament texts. Such work as theirs has now set some of the key terms of the discussion. If, with Graham and Kelber, we move behind the print culture on which our eyes are usually fixed, what is meant by scripture becomes wider and more diverse. In the middle ages, Christian Scripture cannot be confined to what was inscribed on codices or scrolls in Hebrew, Greek, and/or Latin translation. The latter, broken into more easily memorable sections, was commonly learned and recited orally by priests and monks. If we are to deal with such oral aspects of scripture, then our concept must obviously include texts in oral performance. And we must take into account different forms of written scripture (a necessary redundancy) and different forms of oral appropriation. Perhaps the "most common denominator" will be the contents of the text, whether in oral-memorial or written (or visual) form. Moreover, there has often been a close relationship between the oral and the written cultivation of scriptural texts. Recent work in related fields has revealed the remarkable interrelation between orality and scribal practice with regard to other authoritative (although perhaps not scriptural) texts in medieval Europe (Carruthers 1990, Clanchy 1993, Doane 1994, and others). Oral cultivation has often affected the continuing development of written texts as scribes with memorial knowledge of the text made new written copies.

Conceptually, once we back away from the modern print-cultural definition of scripture, it is more satisfactory and more historically accurate to say that the text of scripture functioned as much (or more) in scribal memory and oral recitation as in (but not independent of) writing on scrolls. Correspondingly the term “text” then would refer to the contents that are learned and recited as well as written on scrolls (as in older usage; see *OED*; and compare the Latin *textus*, that which has been woven, texture, and even context; also the Greek verb *rhaptô*, “to stitch,” behind the compound *rhapsôdeô*, “to recite”). When we want to use “text” to refer more specifically to either a text in memory and recitation or a written text, we could “mark” it as “written text” or “oral text” for clarity. Graham called for this move in the use of the term “text” twenty years ago in reference to Walter Ong’s observation regarding the relentless domination of textuality understood according to print-culture in the scholarly mind.

At least the contents of Christian scripture, particularly the Gospels, far from being limited to the literate elite, have functioned in significant ways among ordinary people. The functioning of scripture among ordinary people is difficult to get a handle on. What would scripture have meant for medieval peasants who could not read Latin and perhaps rarely heard texts read or recited, even in Latin? Scripture as written on codices was something very holy and mysterious possessed by the Church hierarchy in cathedrals and monasteries. At least some medieval peasants, however, were not ignorant of the contents of scripture as stories, symbols, and significant figures. They heard about these in homilies, perhaps on particular saints’ days, and saw them in murals and statues that decorated even tiny rural chapels. Early print editions of the *Biblia pauperum* contain replicas of murals on chapel walls that display scenes from the Gospels flanked by the analogous scenes from the “Old Testament”—a popular version of what Auerbach (1959) wrote about in his essay on *Figura*. When the contents of the Gospels in particular were suddenly made accessible in oral performance to non-literate peasants in the late middle ages they “came alive,” for example among the Lollards in England, the followers of Jan Hus in Bohemia, and the peasants in southwest Germany in 1524-25 (Aston 1984; Deanesly 1966; Blickle 1998; Scribner 1994). For non-literate people it may be difficult to distinguish between scripture and cultural memory. What we are after is relationships of people and scripture, looking at the different functions of scripture in various circumstances.

Mark’s Relation to Judean Scriptures in Comparison with Scribal Cultivation

The standard view of the Gospel of Mark in New Testament studies rooted in the assumptions of print-culture is that it was “written” by an “author” on the basis of written sources. On the standard assumption of general literacy, particularly in Jewish society, and the availability of books of the Hebrew Bible (“the Law and the Prophets,” “Old Testament”), Mark was supposed to have “quoted” from books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Psalms. Recent research in a number of areas can now be brought together to construct quite a different picture that takes the relationship of oral communication and written texts more fully into account. In that different picture, moreover, the Gospel of Mark seems to stand at some distance from the scribal culture in which written Judean texts were cultivated.

First, studies have now documented extensively that literacy in Roman Judea was perhaps even more limited than in the Roman empire generally (Achteimeier 1990; Botha 1992; Harris 1989; Hezser 2001). Beyond scribal circles, communication was almost completely oral, ordinary people having little use for writing. Insofar as writing was limited to the cultural elite in second-temple Judea (Hezser), the cultivation of written texts was concentrated in circles of scribes who had taken on this role and responsibility in the service of the Jerusalem temple-state (Carr 2005; Horsley 1995 and 2007).

Second, recent analysis of different “kinds” of writing in Judea, the ancient Near East, and in Greece and Rome (Niditch 1996) have made us sensitive to how particular written texts may have functioned. We cannot assume that texts were written to be “studied” and “interpreted,” as in scholarly print-culture. Scrolls were expensive, cumbersome, and difficult to read, unless one was already familiar with the text. Besides being relatively inaccessible, however, some ancient writings were not intended for regular consultation. They had other statuses and functions (Horsley 2007). Some were laid up in temples or palace store-rooms as specially inscribed texts. Some of those were also “constitutional” in function. Books of Mosaic torah, for example, were “found,” recited publicly in Jerusalem, and then presumably redeposited in the Temple (2 Kings 22:3-23:24; Nehemiah 8) to legitimate great reforms in the Judean temple-state.

Third, as a result of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is now evident that the authority of the books that were later included in the Hebrew Bible held what might be called relative authority in Judean society. Close study of the scrolls of the books of the Pentateuch and the Prophets that were later included in the Hebrew Bible has shown that in late second-temple times they existed in multiple textual traditions and that each of those textual traditions was still developing (Ulrich 1999). Judging from the relative number of copies of those books found in the caves at Qumran, compared with the number of copies of other books, such as Jubilees and alternative books of Torah found there, the books later defined as biblical shared scriptural status with a wide range of texts (Horsley 2007). Their authority, as well as their texts, was still developing. The written “books of Moses,” moreover, also shared authority with the ordinances promulgated by the Pharisees that were included as part of official state law under some high priests (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:296-98, 408-09).

Most important for consideration of the oral as well as written aspects of the Judean scriptures may be the recent recognition that scribes themselves were engaged in oral cultivation of texts. Just as in the ancient Near East and under the monarchy of Judah, in later second-temple times scribes not only learned writing and made written copies of texts, but also learned texts mainly by recitation (Jaffee 2000; Carr 2005; Horsley 2007). Texts were thus “written on the tablets of their heart,” with their character as obedient servants of the temple and palace shaped accordingly. Martin Jaffee explained that cultivation of texts by the Pharisees, the scribal-priestly community at Qumran, and later the rabbis was as much oral as written (or oral-written). Following Jaffee’s analysis of a key passage in the Community Rule from Qumran (1QS 6:6-8), it is clear that in their nightly meetings the scribes and priests at Qumran were not “studying” a book of Torah by poring over a scroll as much as reciting a book of Torah that was also inscribed on their memory. Such scribal communities appropriated scripture by ritual recitation (Horsley 2007:115-17). As Graham pointed out, “the ‘internalizing’ of important texts through

memorization and recitation can serve as an effective educational or indoctrinational discipline” (1987:161).

All of these results of recent research conspire to undermine the previously standard construction of the late second-temple Judean scriptures as readily accessible and widely known to a largely literate society by reading. Instead, the books later recognized as biblical, along with other authoritative written texts, were known mainly in circles of scribes who both learned them by recitation and copied them on scrolls.

The Gospel of Mark, however, does not fit this emerging picture of oral-written scribal knowledge and cultivation of Judean scriptures. The feature of the Gospel that provides the obvious “test case” is provided by Mark’s references to what are presented as passages of scripture. In the previously standard construction of biblical studies, it has been assumed that Mark and the other “evangelists” were “quoting” from written texts of scripture. When we reexamine these references in the Gospel apart from the assumptions of print culture, however, it is difficult to find clear indications that written texts were involved. Indeed it is not clear that Mark’s knowledge of the content of scripture is derived from scribal or scribal-like cultivation of scripture that involved written texts in close relation to oral recitation.

The Gospel of Mark introduced “quotes” and some of its other references with the formula “(as) it is written” (*gegraptai*; 1:2; 7:6; etc.). We can presumably conclude from this formula at least that the Gospel derives from a society in which the existence of authoritative written texts was widely known, even that their existence in writing gave them a special authority. A study of the frequent use of the formula in the *Didachê* (“The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” discovered in the nineteenth century) concluded that it is an appeal to the scripture as authority, while the “quotation” may be from memory (Henderson 1992). That a prophecy or a law was “written” on a scroll, especially if it was in a revered text (ostensibly) of great antiquity, gave it an added aura of authority, for ordinary people as much as for the literate elite. Virtually all of the instances where the Gospel of Mark uses the formula are references to a prophecy now being fulfilled. That it stands “written” lends authority to the prophecy and its fulfillment in John or Jesus (Mark 1:2-3; 9:12-13; 14:21, 27) or to Jesus’ application of the prophecy to the Pharisees or the high priests (7:6-7; 11:17). In several cases “it is written” is simply a general appeal to authority, with no particular “quotation” given (9:12-13; 14:21).

In the few cases in Mark where particular words or phrases are quoted, they do not appear to have involved consultation of a written text. In two cases the “quotes” are composites from two different prophets. Mark 1:2-3, ostensibly quoting “the prophet Isaiah,” begins with lines from Malachi (words similar to what we know in our written texts of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3), and the anonymous “quotation” in Mark 11:17 includes lines from both Isaiah and Jeremiah (similar to what we know in Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11). We recognize that the anonymous “quotation” in Mark 7:6-7 derives from Isaiah (although the citation is not very close to written texts of Isaiah 29:13; similarly Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark 4:12). And in Mark 14:27 the short line supposedly quoted from Zechariah 13:7 looks like proverb that may have been well-known, even before Zechariah. The best explanation for all of these cases, particularly the ones of composite “quotations” and the proverb, would seem to be that Mark’s knowledge of this material is oral-memorial and not from examination of written texts. But it is oral-memorial

knowledge that does not appear close to what we would expect of scribes whose knowledge would presumably have been closer to one or another of the written textual traditions.

The other supposed quotations of scripture in Mark are a mixed bag of recitations of oral traditions (with no indication that they also stand in scripture) and/or polemical references in which Jesus states that the authority of what the literate scribes should know very well actually supports his position, or references to scripture as addressed to the (literate) elite but not to the ordinary people for whom Jesus is speaking. In two episodes of the Gospel, Jesus recites “the commandments (of God)” as commonly known oral tradition, against the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem who have voided God’s word and the man who has by implication violated the commandments by accruing great wealth (7:9-13; 10:17-22). Jesus’ followers’ spontaneous singing of a well-known psalm and his reference to the ecstatic David’s declaration in the words of another well-known psalm are similarly derived from oral tradition. At three different points Mark’s Jesus challenges the Pharisees, high priests and scribes, and Sadducees, respectively, with the phrase “have you never/not read,” claiming that their written text supports his action or position against theirs (Mark 2:25; 12:10; 12:26). In all cases the historical incident or statement by God or psalm would almost certainly have been common knowledge in oral tradition, and especially in the incident about David and the bread from the altar, “Jesus’” version is strikingly different from what the Pharisees would have “read” in any of the variant written versions. In the only places where Mark refers to Moses as having “written,” it was for the Pharisees or the Sadducees (10:3-5; 12:19), and by implication not for ordinary people.

This analysis of the “quotations of scripture” in Mark suggests that the Gospel had a complex relation to Judean scripture that was part of a wider cultural tradition. The Gospel and its audience knew of the existence of authoritative written texts. The Gospel not only viewed the written texts as authoritative, finding their fulfillment in Jesus’ mission, but appealed to them as supporting its (Jesus’) position against that of the scribes who should have known them well because they could read. The Gospel’s citations of lines ostensibly “written” in scripture, however, show significant discrepancies with the written texts, greater than would be expected from scribal(-like) oral-written cultivation (some contact with the written text). Some of the Markan references previously classified as “quotations of scripture,” however, can now be understood as derived from commonly known oral tradition. The overall picture that can be derived from examination of Mark’s references is of a very broad knowledge of Judean/Israelite cultural tradition that includes knowledge of the existence of authoritative written texts, limited and sometimes rough knowledge of the contents of those texts, and the assumption that some commonly known historical incidents and teachings of Moses are included in those written texts.

The Importance of Oral Communication in the Origin of the Gospel

This comparison of references to Israelite tradition in Mark’s Gospel with Judean scribal oral-written cultivation of scriptures points to two further and related features of the Gospel: its origins in and orientation toward ordinary people and the corollary, the origins and development of the Gospel in an oral communication environment.

As suggested by its references to tradition, Mark is not a scribal text, but focused on a popular prophet leading a movement of ordinary people. The people involved in the story, and evidently its audience as well, are located in the villages of Galilee and surrounding territories in Syria (villages of Tyre, Caesarea Philippi, and the Decapolis), not Jerusalem, from which scribes and Pharisees “come down” to oppose Jesus. There is even a notable language difference, since Peter is recognized apparently by his “up-country” dialect (presumably of Aramaic; Mark 14:70). After Jesus’ confrontation with the high priests and scribes and his Roman execution in Jerusalem, the audience is directed back to rural Galilee (Mark 14:28; 16:7). This open ending signals where the story continues among its audience.

This story of a leader-and-movement that emerged among villagers and expanded in ever-widening circles among other ordinary people was thus heavily dependent on oral communication, as indicated by ever more extensive research that finds literacy limited mainly to scribal and administrative circles. Under the standard view rooted in assumptions of widespread literacy, it was not possible to explain the development of a Gospel story of Jesus engaged in a renewal of Israel in the absence of knowledge of the Hebrew Bible/Judean scripture, presumed to be *the* medium through which Israelite tradition was known. It now appears that written copies of scriptural books (in Hebrew) were not generally available and that ordinary people (who spoke Aramaic) could not have read them anyhow. Yet ordinary people were by no means ignorant of Israelite tradition or dependent on the scribes and Pharisees to mediate it.

The historian Josephus recounts several incidents in Galilee during the great revolt against Roman rule in 66-67 CE that have been claimed as evidence that Galilean villagers knew and observed “the Torah” (note the vague term). Closer examination of his accounts, however, indicates that the Galileans’ actions were rooted in the basic principles of the Mosaic Covenant, which would presumably have been well-known and observed among Israelite peoples, and not in more specific ordinances or regulations of teachings in one or another books of the Pentateuch (Horsley 1995:128-57). The popular movements in 4 BCE and in the great revolt of 66-70 CE, whose participants acclaimed their respective leaders as “kings” (according to Josephus’ accounts in *Antiquities* 17:271-85 and *War* 2:55-65), were evidently following the same cultural pattern carried in the cultural memory of the popular acclamation of the young David as messiah (cf. 2 Samuel 2:1-5; 5:1-5; Horsley 1984). Similarly, the popular movements led by “prophets” in mid-first century (*Antiquities* 18:85-87; 20:97-98 and 169-71; *War* 2.259-63) were evidently informed by another common cultural pattern carried in the popular memory of Moses and Joshua (Horsley 1985).

These movements were drawing on what anthropologists have termed the “little tradition” cultivated orally in Galilean and Judean village communities, in contrast to the “great tradition” cultivated (orally and in writing) in Jerusalem (Scott 1977). Parallel to the official cultivation of a cultural repertoire by literate experts serving the Jerusalem temple-state was a popular tradition cultivated orally among the people. Although difficult to document, there was surely interaction among the two, which shared many stories, historical legends, covenantal laws (for example, the decalogue), prophecies, and prophetic heroes (for example, Elijah). But we should not imagine that the Judean and Galilean peasants who formed those popular movements, including the movements in response to the prophetic teachings and practices of Jesus of Nazareth, were directly familiar with the contents of “the Law and the Prophets,” nor were they

in possession of and regularly reading from scrolls inscribed in Hebrew. Instead, they had for generations cultivated their own often localized popular Israelite tradition that articulated and grounded their own interests and concerns.

As story about and derived from (and addressed to) a popular movement, the Gospel of Mark emerged from and belonged to the “little tradition” (Horsley 2001:118 and 157-76). And as the developing Gospel was performed in communities of the expanding movement, it resonated with the hearers by referencing the popular tradition (here I am indebted to the theory of performance developed in Foley 1991, 1995, and 2002). The Gospel thus portrays Jesus as a new Moses and Elijah in multiple sea crossings, feedings in the wilderness, healings, appointing twelve disciples who carry on his mission, and addressing people in new (Mosaic) covenantal teaching. None of these episodes need to refer to scripture since they are rooted in and resonate with a popular tradition long cultivated orally among the people.

Oral Communication, Oral Performance, and Oral-Written Texts in the Context in Which Mark Was Cultivated

Contrary to the standard operating assumption of New Testament studies rooted in print culture, oral communication and oral recitation of texts, not the reading and writing of texts, prevailed in the early centuries during which the Gospel of Mark gained authority among communities of Christians. This can be seen in communications in the Hellenistic-Roman world in general, in the communities of Christ in particular, and in the evidence for the oral recitation of texts such as Mark that were eventually included in the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark thus continued to be performed orally in communities of ordinary people even after written copies existed and became fairly widely distributed through repeated recitation and repeated copying.

Below the level of the literate elite, the vast majority of people had little or no need for writing, as noted above for Galilee and Judea. Communication generally was oral and cultivation of cultural traditions was oral. To appreciate that cultivation of texts was oral among ordinary people it may help to recognize that the cultivation of texts was also oral among the literate elite. Just as texts were learned and cultivated by oral recitation by scribes in Judea, so in Hellenistic and Roman literate circles texts that were written were processed orally, with written texts playing ancillary, monumental, and authorizing roles. Public recitation was the principal means of “publishing” a composition. “Reading” a cumbersome chirograph required prior knowledge of the text inscribed on it. Students of virtually any subject learned by recitation and memorization. Those who composed texts did not “write” them as “authors” do in print culture, but dictated them to a secretary or scribe (Graham 1987:30-44; Small 1997; Hezser 2001).

One of the foundational assumptions of modern New Testament studies is that “early Christianity” was a literate culture. It is indeed impressive that Christian communities possessed written copies of some of their revered texts already in the second century. Yet the few early Christian references to oral and/or written communication indicate that the communities of Christ and their nascent intellectual leadership did not just prefer orality, but were even reticent

about or suspicious of writing (Achte-meier 1990; Alexander 1990; Botha 1992; Shiner 2003). In the early second century Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, declared (Eusebius 3.39.3-4):

I inquired about *the words* of the ancients, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples *said*, and what Ariston and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, were *saying*. For I did not suppose that things from books (*ek tôn bibliôn*) would benefit me so much as things *from a living and abiding voice* (*zôsês phônês kai menousês*).

Papias' statement indicates both the oral mode of communication and the high valuation placed on the direct oral continuity of communication from the Lord through the previous two generations of disciples. The erudite early theologian Clement of Alexandria apologized for committing the teaching of the church to writing. He was clear that written notes are weak and lifeless compared with oral discourses. The former served only instrumental purposes such as aiding the memory or preventing the loss of important teaching. And some teachings could be communicated only orally. It was dangerous to write them down, for they might fall into the hands of those who would misunderstand what he was trying to communicate (Shiner 2003:18; Haines-Eitzen 2000:105).

The *Shepherd of Hermas* presents a fascinating illustration of the function of "books" among the Christ-believers who were non-literate or semi-literate. In the "visions" section of this second-century text produced by a prophet in Rome, Hermas receives a visit from a heavenly revealer (*Shep. vis.* 2.1.3-4):

She said to me, "Can you take this message to God's elect ones?" I said to her, "Lady, I cannot remember so much; but give me the little book to copy." "Take it," she said, "and give it back to me." I took it and went away to a certain place in the country, and *copied everything, letter by letter, for I could not distinguish the syllables* [*metegrapsamen panta pros gramma ouch heuriskon gar tas syllabas*] So when I had finished the letters of the little book, it was suddenly taken out of my hand; but I did not see by whom.

This scene stands in the revelatory tradition known from earlier Enoch texts, the book of Daniel, and the book of Revelation, a tradition that includes heavenly books shown to visionaries, thus lending their visions the highest authority of divine writing (Niditch 1996; Horsley 2007:89-130). Hermas' vision reflects knowledge of how new copies of written copies of texts were made, and then returned to the one from whom they were borrowed (Haines-Eitzen 2000:21-40). Later the "ancient lady" had "additional words" for Hermas to "make known to all the elect." Hermas is to send two books, respectively, to Clement and Grapte, who would exhort the widows and orphans. Meanwhile Hermas was to "read it [the book] with the elders in charge of the assembly" (*Vis.* 2.4.2-3). But Hermas does not know how to read the book, as he has already indicated in the way he describes his copying ("letter by letter, since I could not distinguish the syllables"). He cannot make out the syllables so that he knows how the text sounds, that is, he cannot reoralize the written text in a recitation, he cannot read. In immediate "literary" context as well as in the general cultural context, it seems clear that Hermas' "reading,"

like Grapte's exhortation, was an oral performance of a text known in memory. At least some of the "authors" of the revered "writings" of the apostolic and sub-apostolic "fathers" were not literate. The point is that cultivation (learning and appropriation) of texts was by oral recitation or performance.

This further communication of his revelation by the non- or semi-literate Hermas and Papias' highest valuation of "the living voice" also illustrate the third point about how oral communication predominated in the context in which Mark would have been performed. Most valuable to the subsequent generations of Christ-believers was the direct chain of oral recitation of the "words of the Lord." Written books were of secondary, ancillary value. From his close investigation of the performance of texts in the Hellenistic-Roman world, Whitney Shiner concluded that a "reader" of the Gospels did not need to know how to read from a codex: "The performer could learn the Gospel from hearing oral performances or by hearing others recite it" (2003:26). Justin Martyr reports that at Sunday assemblies "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time permits" (*ibid.*:45). Hippolytus says that "Scripture was read at the beginning of services by a succession of readers until all had gathered. . . . This practice lasted at least to the time of Augustine." He comments that many people had learned to recite (large portions of) the Gospels themselves from hearing them recited in services (45 and 107).

As in both Judean culture and Hellenistic-Roman culture generally, early Christians committed texts to memory in order then to recite or perform them orally. Such performers probably included some who were semi-literate. Already in the second century, and certainly in the third and fourth centuries, at least some Christians possessed craft literacy, and were copyists, secretaries, "calligraphers." Origen's wealthy patron provided him with copyists and (women) calligraphers. That example, of course, also indicates that even craft literacy was not especially common. As we know from the fourth-century report by Epiphanius (67.1.1-4 and 67.7.9), even the professional copyist, Hieracas, in Leontopolis in Egypt, memorized the Old and New Testaments in order to recite and comment on the texts. Or, to come at this from another angle, the striking lack of evidence "regarding copyists involved in reproducing [written] Christian texts prior to the fourth century is itself instructive" (Haines-Eitzen 2000:38-39). Copies of books were not readily available. Whoever wanted a written copy of a text had to ask someone who possessed it to have a copy made and send it along. Written copies of texts were revered, hence in demand. But texts were usually cultivated orally.

Detailed recent investigations by text critics are now confirming that oral recitation was probably the predominant form of appropriation and further cultivation of revered authoritative texts such as the Gospels in Christian communities. David Parker (1997) and others are recognizing that manuscripts from the second and third centuries are extremely varied. The majority of what are still called "textual variants" of Christian books originated in the first two centuries, in the relatively free transmission process (Parker 1997; Haines-Eitzen 2000:76). There is more disagreement/variation among (fragmentary) manuscripts of a given Gospel than between the Gospels. There is a growing awareness that manuscripts cannot be neatly grouped into distinctive traditions or versions. The evidence is too varied, even chaotic. Text critics have characterized the fluid state of the texts as "uncontrolled," "unstable," "wild," "free," suggesting unlimited flexibility and even randomness (Haines-Eitzen 2000:106-07). Parker and Haines-

Eitzen suggest this evidence may indicate that oral cultivation of the texts influenced and was reflected in the copying of the texts, a suggestion that invites further exploration. It appears that through the second and third centuries Mark, like the other Gospels, continued to be performed orally from memory. Not until the Church suddenly became eagerly responsive to the imperial state, with the initiative coming from Constantine himself, did bishops such as Eusebius order “fifty copies of the divine scriptures . . . for the instruction of the church, to be written on well-prepared parchment by copyists most skillful in the art of accurate and beautiful writing” (cited in Gamble 1995:79, note 132).

The Gospel of Mark as Memorable and Performable

To have been continuously performed, and to have resonated with the people, such that it became widely used, the Gospel of Mark must have been memorable and performable in significant ways. Exploration of Mark as oral performance has barely begun among Gospel scholars. Yet there have been some suggestive probes, and the results and implications of these can be summarized here.

Drawing on and Adapting Israelite Tradition and Larger Cultural Patterns

Much of the literary analysis that was borrowed by Gospel interpreters in the 1970s and 1980s was developed to deal with modern prose fiction. The assumption was that students were reading novels (or a Gospel) for the first time and not familiar with the story. In the assemblies of Christ where Gospels were performed in the late first and second-third centuries, however, both the performer and the community of listeners were already familiar with the story and/or the Jesus-speeches. I want to focus briefly on two key implications of the already familiar story, partly to counter the persistence in New Testament studies of the belief that the Gospels made a decisive break with “Judaism,” and the residual habit of focusing mainly on text-fragments such as individual sayings or episodes.

Precisely because the Gospel was an oft-told story, both the performers and the audiences were familiar not only with the Gospel story, but also with the Israelite tradition(s) in reference to which it resonated. Israelite cultural tradition traveled in and with the Gospel story. Hearers were thus on familiar cultural ground, since Mark’s story, for example, began with Jesus receiving a call and undergoing a test in the wilderness, as had Moses and Elijah, the founding prophet of Israel and the prophet of renewal, respectively. They would almost have expected Jesus then to call protégés, as Elijah had called Elisha to help expand his renewal of Israel, and of course there should be twelve disciples in a program of renewal of Israel (Mark 1:16-20, 3:13-19, and 6:7-13). Like Moses, Jesus led sea-crossings and presided over feedings in the wilderness for a people without sufficient food, and like Elijah he performed healings (Mark 5-8). Again in the recapitulation of Moses, he not only knew and recited the covenant commandments, but he also gave renewed covenantal teaching for revitalized community life (Mark 10:2-45).

Israelite tradition also offered roles other than that of the prophet like Moses or Elijah that Jesus could have been adapting, such as that of the young David who, acclaimed “messiah” by his followers, led them against foreign conquerors, an issue with which several episodes in Mark’s Gospel struggle. Israelite prophets such as Elijah and Jeremiah, moreover, had boldly opposed the oppressive rulers of the people and had been persecuted and hunted down. In more recent Judean tradition, those who had been martyred in resisting the foreign emperor’s attempt to control or interfere with the traditional Mosaic covenantal way of life had been vindicated by God. In any number of ways that we who are not as familiar with Israelite tradition do not even “get,” the episodes of the Gospel story and even the sequence of the episodes of the Gospel story were already familiar in the cultural memory of Jesus’ followers, at the center of which was Israelite tradition. Those who performed and heard the Gospel in Greek-speaking villages a few generations later and who were now using those same Scriptures as their own would be aware of how the story of Jesus resonated with stories and prophecies that had become part of their cultural memory (on cultural/social memory, see Kelber 2002 and Kirk and Thatcher 2005).

The other key implication is implicit in the first. While biblical scholars have standardly focused on tiny text-fragments (isolated sayings or verses) and drawn connections between one verse and another, both narratives and prophetic oracles in the scriptures are rooted in, express, and adapt larger cultural patterns. As noted above, the popular prophetic and messianic movements in Judea and Galilee at the time of Jesus were informed by the cultural patterns carried in Israelite traditions of Moses-Joshua and the young David (Horsley 1984 and 1985). Both of those same broader cultural patterns can be discerned to be operative in Mark’s story, which portrays Jesus as a new Moses and struggles with whether and how Jesus was a messiah like David. To take the other most evident example, the broad pattern of Mosaic covenant that was clearly operative in the texts produced by the Qumran community (the Community Rule and the Damascus Rule) can be discerned in and behind the series of dialogues in Mark 10:2-45 as well as in Matthew’s “sermon on the mount” (Horsley 2001:177-202). The point here is that the Israelite cultural memory out of which the Gospel of Mark developed included such broad cultural patterns, and their adaptation in Mark’s Gospel make it memorable and performable, thus contributing to its taking root in communities of early Christians.

Oral Narrative Features and Devices

In his ground-breaking *Oral and Written Gospel* (1983), Werner Kelber enabled us to appreciate most of the Jesus-stories that were the components of the Gospel of Mark as oral performances. Many of his observations about those oral components of Mark also apply to the Gospel as a whole. Since Kelber’s study, others such as Pieter Botha (1991) and Joanna Dewey (1994) have furthered the discussion of the oral features of the Markan narrative.¹

In a discussion of “Mark’s Oral Legacy,” Kelber identifies several key features of oral narrative in the component “stories” of the Gospel (1983:64-70). These same features, such as formulaic connective devices (like “and,” “immediately,” “and again,” which are usually omitted in English translations) also link together the many episodes of the Gospel. While some of these

¹ The following paragraphs draw upon Horsley 2001 and 2008.

connectives may have been present already in oral stories that became incorporated into the overall narrative, the latter may have stimulated some of them as well. The effect is an action-packed narrative of “one thing after another.”

Another feature that contributes to the oral performative character of Mark’s Gospel is the plethora of folkloristic triads in the narrative (Kelber 1983:66). The healing stories unfold in three steps. Parables often have three steps. That Peter denies Jesus three times and even that Jesus asks the disciples to watch with him three times might be explained as derived from stories that Mark incorporated. Yet, as Kelber pointed out, there are recurrent appearances of threes that cannot be accounted for in this way. Jesus predicts his arrest, execution, and rising three times, clearly a structuring element in the middle step of the narrative focusing on Jesus and the disciples. The narrative distinguishes three disciples for special focus, and Jesus enters Jerusalem three times. Both are structural features in the overall story.

In addition to the formulaic connectives and various triads, the Gospel includes various devices of “narrative maneuvering,” such as the well-known Markan “sandwich” technique of juxtaposing two stories, one framing the other. The scribes’ charge that Jesus works in the power of Beelzebul is framed by Jesus’ family’s concern that he is possessed (3:20-35); the healing of the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years is framed by the healing of the twelve-year-old dead young woman (5:21-43); Jesus’ prophetic demonstration against the Temple is framed by the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-25); and Jesus’ trial before the high priesthood is framed by Peter’s denial (15:52-72). In this device of oral storytelling the core episode and the framing episode reinforce and interpret each other.

A similar but somewhat more complex oral narrative device is the concentric or chiasmic structuring of several stories. Most striking, and most carefully studied, is the arrangement of the five episodes (of healing—eating—celebrating—eating—healing) in 2:1—3:6 (Dewey 1980). Without elaborating on the remarkable patterning in these five episodes, let me point out that they display many connections with the contents and themes of the Gospel as a whole. Healing (including exorcism) and eating (including the wilderness feedings and covenantal meal at passover) are two of Jesus’ principal activities throughout Mark’s narrative. Both actions anticipate but also manifest the coming of the kingdom of God (that is, the renewal of Israel), the overall theme of the Gospel. This sequence of five episodes also exemplifies how Jesus’ actions challenge the dominant order centered in Jerusalem as represented by the scribes and Pharisees. This is also central to the dominant plot of the Gospel as a whole. Again, it is typical of oral narrative that particular sequences of episodes or stanzas exemplify, in microcosm, the overall theme or plot of the narrative.

Another example of the oral “narrative maneuvering” may be the reiteration of a pattern already current in the pre-Markan oral tradition in the second major narrative step of the story. Close readers of Mark discerned behind the sequence of episodes in Mark 4:35-8:26 two “chains” of stories that have the same order (Achtmeier 1990). The first consists of a sea-crossing, an exorcism, two healings (arranged in one of Mark’s “sandwich” formations), and a wilderness feeding (4:35-41; 5:1-20; 5:21-24 and 35-43; 5:24-34; 6:30-44). The second (6:45-52; 7:24-30; 7:31-37; 8:1-10; 8:22-26) has the same sequence, except that it inverts the last two stories in order to frame the next major narrative step (8:22-10:52) with healing of blind figures

at the beginning and end. This is yet another feature that would aid in oral performance and hearing.

By themselves, without insertion of other episodes, those sets of stories clearly represent Jesus as enacting the renewal of Israel as a prophet like Moses and Elijah, the great founder (sea-crossing and wilderness feeding) and renewer (healings) of Israel, respectively, in the popular Israelite cultural memory. By inserting additional episodes into these chains, the Markan narrative expands their message of the renewal of Israel. For example, in the mission of the twelve (representative of the twelve tribes), Mark's Jesus further confirms that his program of the kingdom of God is a renewal of Israel. And the story of Herod Antipas's arrest and execution of the Baptist illustrates what happens to prophets engaged in a renewal of Israel and, more specifically, prefigures what is about to happen to Jesus. Thus the materials inserted into the "chains" enable the listeners to hear that the message of the chain and that of the whole story are the same, that is, the renewal of Israel over against the rulers of Israel.

The Overall Narrative Structure of the Gospel of Mark

On the basis of these implications of Kelber's earlier work and others' insights, we can discern the narrative structure and structuring elements that must have made the Gospel of Mark a most memorable and performable text in the first several generations of its use. I will delineate the overall structure and then comment on how the "infrastructure" would help make the Gospel easily memorable. (I am aware of the irony of continuing to use visual-spatial metaphors such as "structure" and chapter-and-verse numbers to "locate" sections of a text.)

The Narrative Steps in the Gospel of Mark

- Opening: John's announcement, Jesus' baptism and testing in wilderness (1:1-13)
- Theme: Jesus (as prophet) proclaims that the Kingdom of God is at hand (1:14-15)
- First step: Jesus launches renewal of Israel in Galilee (1:16-3:35)
- Speech: Jesus teaches the mystery of the kingdom in parables (4:1-34)
- Second step: Jesus like Moses/Elijah continues renewal of Israel (4:35-8:21/26)
- Third step: Jesus debates his role and renews covenant (8:22/27-10:52)
- Fourth step: Jesus proclaims divine judgment of Temple, high priests (11:1-13:1-2)
- Speech: Jesus speaks about future, exhorting solidarity, and not being misled (13:3-37)
- Fifth step: Jesus' last supper, arrested, trial; crucifixion by the Romans (14-15)
- Open ending: direction back to "Galilee" for continuation of movement (16:1-8)

Except for the two pauses for the speeches, the overall narrative consists of one episode after another linked with "ands" and frequent references to "immediately." As noted above, all of the narrative steps included devices that provided some intermediate patterning. In the first step (after the obligatory first move, for a prophet like Elijah, of calling protégés to assist him), Jesus enters the assembly (*synagôge*) in the village of Capernaum (1:21) and then returns "home" to Capernaum (2:1), again enters the assembly (3:1), and again goes "home" (3:19), at fairly evenly timed intervals in the narrative. As noted just above, the next narrative step (4:35-8:21/26) is

organized around two series of five episodes in the same sequence that recapitulate the prophetic acts of Moses and Elijah (sea-crossing, exorcism, two healings, and a wilderness feeding), except that the last two in the second series are reversed to provide an episode of healing a blind person as an opening to frame the next narrative step. The third step in the narrative is structured by the three announcements of Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and rising that serve as foils to the dialogue episodes in this section. This step closes with another healing of a blind man that corresponds to the transitional episode from the previous narrative step, a framing that sets off the increasing blindness of the disciples to what Jesus is doing and its implication. In the fourth narrative step Jesus enters Jerusalem three times, first in a seemingly "messianic" demonstration, then in a demonstration that announces God's condemnation of the Temple, and then for a sustained confrontation with the ruling high priests and their representatives. The climactic narrative step features two "sandwich" or framing devices: first, the high priests' resolve to arrest and kill Jesus and Judas' betrayal frame the last supper; and second, Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane followed by Peter's denial frames Jesus' trial.

In addition to the "infrastructure" of the narrative steps, there are numerous links between and across the narrative steps, including repetitions of themes that drive home the message. Between the second and third and the third and fourth narrative steps, and between the fourth narrative step and the second speech are episodes that make them overlap. These episodes belong to the previous step, but also begin the next step or speech (the healing of the first blind person, the healing of the second blind person, and the prophecy of the destruction of the Temple). In the first narrative step, after an exorcism and several healings and disputes with the scribes or Pharisees, the latter conspire with the Herodians against Jesus, announcing clearly what is coming in the climax of the story. In the second narrative step, introduced by Herod Antipas' question about Jesus' identity, comes the episode in which Herod beheads John, again prefiguring the climax of the story with the arrest and execution of Jesus. In the third narrative step, the same question about Jesus' identity and Peter's adamant answer that he is "the messiah" introduces Jesus' first announcement that he will be executed, prompting Peter's protest and Jesus' sharp rebuke "get behind me, Satan."

Additional links are evident between the first and second narrative steps and the second and third steps. After calling the first four disciples and then naming the full twelve, suggesting a renewal of Israel, in the first step, Jesus then heals two women, one hemorrhaging for twelve years and the other twelve years old, suggesting a renewal of Israel, and then commissions the twelve to expand his program of preaching and healing among the villages of Israel, in the second step. After Jesus does Moses-like and Elijah-like actions in the second narrative step, he then appears on the mountain with Moses and Elijah in the third narrative step. In links and repetitions such as these, the overall narrative is tied together and the performer (and audience) has cues and other devices that make the sequence of "one thing after another" come up in memory and flow out in plotted sequence.

In its various narrative devices of connectives and maneuvering, its adaptation of familiar cultural patterns, and the many connectives of its narrative structure, the Gospel of Mark was memorable and performable in the oral communication context of early Christian communities. Further exploration of Mark's narrative in oral performance should open up additional memorable and performable aspects of the Gospel.

Mark's Resonance with Hearers in Context

As a performed text, the Gospel of Mark would have resonated with its hearers in particular historical (performance) contexts. In his discussion of "Mark's Oral Legacy," Kelber also reminds us that oral communication is embedded in its context, which has not only cultural and aesthetic aspects but political and economic ones as well. In fact, "nonlinguistic features have priority over linguistic ones" (1983:75). Oral communication receives powerful ideological and situational support from its context as it resonates with the hearers. For Mark's Gospel we are attempting to understand not only its origins but also its continuing performance in early Christian communities in Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, and so on. Whitney Shiner makes the important observation that in oral performance the narrative happens simultaneously in two worlds, the imagined world of the narrative and the concrete social world of the performance context. In contrast with a silent modern reader who perceives dialogue as taking place within the story world of a text, the ancient hearers of Mark would have heard dialogue within their own situation as well. There was thus "a partial collapse between the narrative dialogue and the audience" (Shiner 2003:171).

To appreciate the performance context of communities of Christ among peoples subject to the Roman empire and how the narrative may have resonated with them, modern Western scholars need to cut through at least two layers of blockage. One is the heavy layer of Christian supersessionism and anti-Judaism according to which Mark and Matthew have been read. As noted above, in these texts no split has yet taken place between "Christianity" and "Judaism." Both are stories of the fulfillment of Israel that has now expanded to include other, non-Israelite peoples (and there, indeed, are the seeds of subsequent supersessionism). The division evident in the texts is between the rulers and the ruled, not between "Jews" and "Christians." There is no question that some "Christian" texts (Luke-Acts) were playing up the Roman destruction of Jerusalem as God's punishment for the Judean rulers' collaboration in the killing of Jesus. But that is not true of all texts.

The other obstruction to our understanding is our own different social location and historical situation. If we listen with the ears of ancient people who were poor and under heavy obligation for rents or taxes to the wealthy and powerful local magnates, perhaps we can sense how both particular episodes and the whole Gospel story would have resonated with them. Mark repeatedly represents Jesus criticizing the powerful and their representatives for their demands on and exploitation of the poor. He accuses them of "devouring" widows' houses and of urging villagers to "dedicate" to the Temple the economic resources they need locally to "honor their father and mother" (Mark 12:38-40 and 7:9-13). Mark has Jesus insisting on cooperative non-exploitative economic life in their communities, in keeping with the covenantal commandments (versus the negative example of wealthy fellow seeking "eternal life"). "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25).

The parable of the tenants in Mark's Gospels (Mark 12:1-9) offers an illustrative episode that, working creatively from Israelite cultural tradition, would have resonated with virtually any community in antiquity. Many of the rural hearers may have become tenants of their creditors as a result of spiraling debts; and many of the urban hearers or their parents may well have migrated

into the city because they or their ancestors had lost their land to absentee landlords. The parable builds on the “song of the vineyard” that Isaiah had used to indict the wealthy for their exploitation of the peasants and seizure of their land. Jesus’ parable dramatizes the sharp conflict between the wealthy absentee landlords, often also the rulers, and their tenants, who had been forced off their land that the landlords now controlled. Poor listeners would have been sympathetic with the tenants. But “Jesus” turns the parable against the wealthy rulers, with the implication that the vineyard/land will be given to others, that is, to those whom the wealthy landlord has exploited.² The parable of the tenants as applied is a virtual microcosm of the whole Gospel story, which portrays Jesus carrying out a renewal of the people over against the rulers of the people. Mark’s narrative that focuses on the renewal of the people of Israel was recognizably representative of the similar conflict in other areas of the Roman empire where it was performed.

In sum, the Gospel of Mark was not a good candidate to become scripture according to the prevailing models and standards either of Judean scribal circles or of Greco-Roman intellectual circles. As a story about a popular prophetic leader of a renewal movement among ordinary people in Galilee, it was evidently regularly performed orally among other communities of ordinary people in an ever-widening radius. Having become revered and authoritative for the broad base of the Christian movement during the second and third centuries, Mark was among the popular texts defended by the nascent Christian literate intellectuals against their cultural detractors. With strong resonance among the populace, these ordinary people’s stories were also eventually acknowledged by the emergent hierarchy of the established Church as integral to the canon of the New Testament that was added to the Jewish scriptures in Greek as Christian Scripture. But what led to their inclusion in the canon was their repeated oral performance as increasingly authoritative, scriptural texts in the second and third centuries before standardized written copies were widely available.

University of Massachusetts, Boston

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² There is no indication in Mark that the “others” are “Christians” who are replacing “the Jews.” It is clear that they are the ordinary people addressed throughout the story.

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