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# The Gospel of Mark as an Oral/Aural Narrative: Implications for Preaching

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It is almost impossible for us to appreciate how unimportant manuscripts were for the first 100 or more years for the spread of the gospel traditions. It was an oral world, and when manuscripts were used, they were used as scripts for performance. The Gospel of Mark may well have been composed orally and transmitted orally for decades. It is a compelling story that can be performed in about an hour and a half, a normal time for storytelling, especially after the evening meal. A good storyteller familiar with Jesus' traditions could hear it once and tell it again. It may well have been its popularity as an oral story among first- and second-century followers of Jesus that enabled its survival and inclusion in the New Testament canon. Since Matthew and/or Luke include some 90 percent of its material, it is surprising that copies of Mark survived at all, given that manuscripts of Q have not. As a Gospel composed orally—or certainly composed in an oral style—and normally performed in its entirety, it would have had a more emotional impact in the first centuries, encouraging hearers to remain faithful followers of Jesus, despite the real possibility that following might lead to persecution. In this essay, I shall briefly describe the first-century media world, the characteristics of oral media, and finally ways to recapture some of the oral impact of the whole Gospel in spite of the way the lectionary treats Mark.

## First-century media world

The best estimate is that the overall literacy rate in the Roman empire, including Jewish Palestine, was at most five percent.<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists and sociologists suggest it was more likely two to four percent. It might have been as high as fifteen percent for urban males in Greek cities. Literacy was normal only among the elite, the top one percent of the population—certainly among elite men, and often among elite women. But, because reading and writing were considered labor, scribes, who were often slaves, did the writing and reading for them.

The primary use of writing was to communicate at a distance:

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1. For the Roman Empire, see William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). For Palestine, see Catherin Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001). For further information and references, see J. Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church: Speaking, Writing, and the Gospel of Mark* (Biblical Performance Criticism 8; Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2013), 5–12.

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for example, the administrative letters that enabled Roman rule, and Paul's letters to his churches. Manuscripts were written in continuous script with no spaces between words and no punctuation; they had to be sounded out, syllable by syllable, to be understood at all. Silent reading did not become common until the medieval period, about the same time as punctuation came into use.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, manuscripts were expensive and, if handled, subject to deterioration. They have copying errors. No two manuscripts are identical. The earliest extant text of Mark is a small fragment from the third century; and the first full texts of the Gospel are in the time of Constantine in the fourth century. More importantly, however, manuscripts were not considered authoritative. What mattered was memory. At all levels of society, what one knew was what one could remember.

If not by writing, how then did information spread? How did people hear what was going on? Public criers attached to every level of government would broadcast official information. In addition, storytellers also transmitted traditions and lore for the nonliterate masses. Only a little information is available about such popular nonliterate storytellers, since the elite who used manuscripts tended to ignore them. Basically, we know three groups of popular storytellers in antiquity: street performers, who traveled about eking out a very marginal existence; a somewhat higher status group, who told religious and secular stories outside of temples and synagogues,

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2. M. E. Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*. (Salem, Ore.: Polebridge, 2009), 26.

entertaining and teaching people; and, finally, those who did not make their living at it, but who were known in their village, town, or region as good tellers of tales.<sup>3</sup> Storytellers and teachers in the Jesus movement fall in the last two groups.

### Characteristics of oral media

It is only since we have moved into a more electronic world, with radio, TV, and Internet, that we have become aware that the media characteristics of print culture were not the norm historically, and increasingly are not the norm today. Tight plots, such as those in detective stories, only come into existence after the wide use of print media. In the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, when print was the dominant medium, readers read silently as separate individuals. They read primarily for content, in the case of the Gospels, for information about what Jesus said and did. Oral cultures were more communal, more participatory, more emotional and empathetic, more argumentative or adversarial—that is, agonistic—and less cognitively oriented.

Oral characteristics may be summarized as follows: content is combined in additive, rather than subordinating, relationships; the structure is aggregative, rather than analytic or linear; the content is also repetitious or “copious,” close to the human world, argumentatively toned, and empathetic and participatory, rather than objectively distanced.<sup>4</sup> Using “and next . . . and next” to connect episodes, a story in oral style consists of episode heaped upon episode, instead of an analytic argument or intricately developed plot. At the beginning of chapter three, the composer of Mark tells us Jesus will be killed, and only develops this plot in chapter fourteen. The content is repetitive, and the composer piles on miracle after miracle and controversy story after story. The episodes are concrete, not abstract, and may easily be visualized. The storyteller performs the story, not from a memorized text in his or her head, but rather composes in performance by visualizing one episode after another. The tone is agonistic, that is, argumentative, combative, even at times hostile. The composer engages the audience, and enlists their sympathy on one side or another. While transfer of information certainly occurs, the aim is persuasion, or emotional commitment, not the mastering of content.

As we move into an increasingly oral culture today, we can observe some of the same phenomena. Our attention span is getting shorter and more episodic. Our culture is becoming more agonistic and polarized. Rhetoric, whether in ancient Rome or contemporary America, “tends to polarize life in partisan terms rooted in concrete life situations.”<sup>5</sup> The emotional participation of the audiences and their hostility to outsiders was evident in Donald Trump’s campaign rallies (for example, the cry about

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Hilary Clinton, “Lock her up”). Walter Ong describes electronic orality as “bent on participation but participation is self-consciously planned and fully supervised.”<sup>6</sup>

Electronics are mass media, following crowd-manipulatory recipes. This is nothing new: the orators of ancient Rome were past masters at crowd manipulation. We have moved back into a more oral rhetorical culture aimed at persuasion; but now, with the emergence of mass media, we have the ability to influence millions of people, not just a crowd close enough to hear a speaker. The primary negative example of mass media oral influence is, of course, Hitler. Oral media culture, however, is not in itself necessarily positive or negative, though the potential for manipulation is greatly increased with mass media. The Gospel of Mark, as an oral performance, offered Jesus’ followers meaning and hope in the difficult oppressive situations of the empire of Rome, and perhaps may also offer hope today.

### The Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark was composed to be heard in its entirety, not in snippets over the course of the lectionary year. The Gospel opens with the proclamation of the good news of the arrival of God’s kingdom. After the prologue (1:1–13), establishing that John the Baptist and Jesus are agents of God, the Markan Jesus comes into Galilee saying, “The time is up: the empire of God has arrived! Turn around, and put your trust in the good news” (1:15 my translation).<sup>7</sup> Traditional versions translate the verb regarding God’s empire’s arrival as “is at hand” (RSV) or “has come near” (NRSV). Modern readers often interpret these translations as meaning that God’s empire is close but not yet here; its blessings are still future. However, the central good news—the message of Mark—is that God’s empire has truly begun, and many blessings of its arrival are already present now in this age, even if the empire will not fully come in power until God has brought this age to an end.

The Gospel composer then arranged multiple episodes along

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3. For references see Dewey, *Oral Ethos*, 12–14.

4. W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (New Accents; London: Methuen, 1982); 37–49. See also Dewey, *Oral Ethos*, 79–92.

5. W. J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 215.

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6. W. J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 293.

7. The words “empire” and “kingdom” are translations of the same Greek word. Translating the word as “empire” makes clear that this message presents an alternative to the kingdom of Rome.

a journey, following a rough geographical outline. The first eight chapters describe the life of the kingdom in the present age in Galilee. God's empire is characterized (1) by the calling together of a new community—the twelve, Levi, and finally a general invitation to all; (2) by healing—there are many healings and exorcisms restoring people to wholeness, including forgiveness now in the present age which is not dependent on Jesus' death (2:1–12);<sup>8</sup> and (3) by eating—there are several discussions of who to eat with, what and when to eat, and two miraculous feedings of huge crowds. In a subsistence economy, like that of ancient Palestine, health and food are the basic necessities and are often in very short supply. Thus, healing and eating are blessings indeed. The enactment of the arrival of God's empire polarizes people: on the one hand, enthusiastic followers and ever-growing crowds; on the other, the powers-that-be testing Jesus and plotting to get rid of him.

The Markan composer presents 8:27–10:45, the middle section of the Gospel, as a journey from north of Galilee south to Jerusalem. The first eight chapters established for its audiences the marvelous present *blessings* of the empire of God. The composer now introduces the *cost* of participating in God's empire for as long as this age continues. The Markan Jesus prophesies his coming execution and resurrection and the coming persecution of the disciples. The composer of Mark does not hold up suffering in general as part of discipleship. By providing abundant food and health, the Markan Jesus ends much human suffering. What the Gospel composer has in mind is more specific: namely, persecution from the powers-that-be against those who are living the new life of God's kingdom. Furthermore, as is characteristic of oral culture, it is "both-and" not "either-or" thinking. The persecution does not replace or supersede the blessings. Rather, both are real and to be experienced. This portion of the Gospel also gives instructions on community: it is to be egalitarian, inclusive, and open to everyone. The composer of Mark characterizes the disciples as very slow to get Jesus' message, which is an effective way to embed teaching in narrative, and is typical in an agonistic society.

Then, the last chapters, Mark 11–16, take place in and around Jerusalem. The first two focus on the relation of God's empire to current Jewish practice and beliefs, affirming the Jewish command to love God and neighbor. Mark 13 addresses the future, the coming time of woes before God defeats Caesar's empire and fully establishes God's empire in its place. Mark 14–16 describe Jesus' arrest by Roman collaborators among the temple authorities, Jesus' so-called "trials" by temple authorities and Pilate, Jesus' execution by the Romans, and the women's discovery of the empty tomb. The male disciples dramatically fail: they fail to stay awake in Gethsemane, they abandon Jesus altogether at this arrest, and Peter denies Jesus. The women followers also fail, running away at the empty tomb. Restoration, however, is possible—they are to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus.

The three-year lectionary focuses successively on Matthew,

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Mark, and Luke, attempting to give a flavor of each Gospel. For the 2017–2018 Markan year B, the lectionary begins Mark in Advent, telling of John the Baptist (1:1–8). It then covers most of Chapter 1 in the Epiphany season. Since Epiphany is short in 2018, Mark 1:40–2:22 is not heard this year. The lectionary picks up with 2:23–3:6 in the season after Pentecost, and continues quite consistently with selections from chapters 3–12 through the rest of the Pentecost season. Mark 13:1–8, the beginning of the little apocalypse conveying the future after Easter, appears at the end of Year B on the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, and the latter part of it (13:24–37) appears at the beginning of Year B on the First Sunday in Advent. The readings leave out much of the apocalyptic scenario including the promise of the Holy Spirit in situations of persecution (13:9–23). The lectionary assigns the Passion Narrative for Palm Sunday in March and Mark's empty tomb story for Easter Sunday (if the pastor chooses Mark, not John).

Furthermore, patterns of repetition, which are major structuring devices in Mark, are not apparent in the lectionary selections. Healing and some of the eating stories are well represented, but the power of God's empire in the present is not. The Gospel presents a miraculous boat episode, a feeding of multitudes episode, another boat episode, another feeding episode, and a final boat episode. Of those five passages showing God's gifts in the present, the lectionary includes only the first boat scene (4:35–41).

The Gospel shows the cost of discipleship through the three-fold repetition of the prediction of Jesus' execution and resurrection. Following each repetition is a misunderstanding on the part of the disciples, followed by Jesus' teaching on discipleship. Two healings of sight bracket the whole section (8:22–26 and 10:46–52). The lectionary includes the first prediction/discipleship unit (8:31–38), except that it omits the last verse (9:1), so that Jesus' teaching includes only the cost of discipleship, and not the promise. It includes the second unit (9:30–37 or 9:30–50). However, it omits the third prediction (10:32–34), but includes the disciples' misunderstanding and Jesus' teaching about discipleship (10:35–45). The lectionary omits the first healing of sight (8:22–26), which is a two-stage healing indicating that the following teachings (8:27–9:1) are difficult to understand and accept. But it includes the closing healing of sight (10:46–52), in which Bartimaeus follows Jesus immediately on the way. Nevertheless, this overall section on the cost of discipleship (8:22–10:52) is better represented in the lectionary than Mark's fundamental portrayal of good news: the

8. The healing of the paralytic. This passage is not heard in B years such as 2017–18 when the Epiphany season is short.

arrival of God's empire with its present blessings of community, sufficient food, forgiveness, and the restoration of health.

If the lectionary does not lend itself to an encounter with Mark's Gospel as a whole, which would enable hearers to grasp its message of present blessings as well as possible persecution, how then might a congregation experience it? The ideal way would be to bring in a storyteller to perform the Gospel in an evening or Sunday afternoon. There are several people who perform Mark in churches and other settings; some are professional storytellers and some are professors or pastors.<sup>9</sup> Of course, to bring a storyteller in requires financial resources beyond the capacity of most churches, but a large church or a group of churches might be able to do it as a Lenten program.

The next possibility would be to show a DVD of a teller performing the Gospel to the group or congregation. This is only second best. A live performer interacts directly with his or her audience, often expanding or shortening a passage depending on audience response; whereas, with a DVD, the screen is between the performer and the audience. Yet, a DVD does permit an audience to experience hearing the Gospel *as a whole*.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to hearing the whole Gospel, either from a live storyteller or on a DVD, I encourage members of congregations to attempt storytelling themselves. Hearing the performance of a lectionary Gospel selection offers an experience very different from reading the same Gospel aloud from a lectern. Even with novice storytellers, a passage comes alive. Both the performer and the congregation would hear the difference immediately. The process is to internalize the story, not to memorize it. Performing a short passage is not as intimidating as it sounds. The Network of Biblical Storytellers recommends for its tellers 75 percent accuracy in wording and 95 percent accuracy in content, which is quite achievable. Even for professional storytellers, wording always varies somewhat from performance to performance. Tom Boomershine's book, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling*, is a

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very helpful resource for learning to tell biblical stories.<sup>11</sup> Bringing in a local storyteller to give a workshop on learning stories is even better than learning from a book. Consult the directory on the Network of Biblical Storytellers website ([www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org)) for local storytellers.

Finally, in the course of preaching from the lectionary, the preacher can bring out Mark's good news of the arrival of God's empire with its abundant present blessings. The fundamental proclamation, "The time is up: the empire of God has arrived! Turn around, and put your trust in the good news" (1:15) occurs in the lectionary twice: on the Third Sunday after Epiphany and then again on the First Sunday in Lent. When various healing narratives come up in the lectionary, we can stress that they are part of the good news of God's inbreaking kingdom. But, to experience the impact of the Gospel, we really need to hear it in its entirety. Sometime during the Markan year, by one means or another, present the Gospel *as a whole*!

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9. For example, Tracy Radosevic (Maryland), Phil Ruge-Jones (Wisconsin), and Dennis Dewey (no relation, New York State). They can be reached through the regional directory section of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l website ([www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org)). Also Bert Marshall (Massachusetts, [www.gospelofmarkalive.com](http://www.gospelofmarkalive.com)). In addition, Pam Faro (Colorado) and I (California) perform my script, "Women on the Way," which tells the story of Mark, bringing the women disciples who are mentioned only fifteen verses before the Gospel's end to front and center in the narrative. For the script, see J. Dewey, *Oral Ethos*, 148–156.

10. A DVD of Phil Ruge-Jones's performance of Mark is available for purchase at [wwwcreatespace.com/850050884](http://wwwcreatespace.com/850050884) for \$19.95. Ruge-Jones has prepared a study guide to accompany the DVD, titled "I Tell You, This Is the Way It Is," available from Amazon. You can also view the same performance, chapter by individual chapter, for free on the ANKOSfilms YouTube Web page. Although the YouTube chapters are useful for study groups, the DVD enables the audience to hear the Gospel in one sitting (with an intermission), which offers a better experience of the impact of the Gospel.

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11. Thomas E. Boomershine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988). Additional resources are available online at [www.gotell.org](http://www.gotell.org) and [www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org).