# Orality and the Gospels: A Survey of Recent Research

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# *Orality and the Gospels: A Survey of Recent Research*

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## ABSTRACT

In the last thirty years there have been significant developments in the application of orality studies to the Gospels. The objective of this article is to provide an overview of the field through a survey of its leading proponents, including Werner Kelber, Joanna Dewey, Paul Achtemeier, Peter Botha, Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper, Kenneth Bailey, James Dunn, Richard Bauckham, David Rhoads and Whitney Shiner. The essay begins with a discussion of several foundational studies, before turning specifically to the reconception of orality and the implication of this research for the Gospels. The study concludes that, while an appreciation of orality has made inroads into certain segments of Gospels research, it remains a neglected and underexploited dimension of NT interpretation.

Keywords: Gospels, Historical Jesus, orality, oral tradition, performance.

## *Introduction*

That an oral tradition lay behind the Gospels is widely accepted. Jesus, the disciples and his early followers lived in a milieu that was largely illiterate (Harris 1989; Bar-Ilan 1992; Hezser 2001), and though literary texts were important in the culture of late Western antiquity, the primary means of

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communication was through the spoken word. Email, internet blogs and daily newspapers were not the media employed for social networking or information exchange. Christianity was birthed and its traditions first circulated in a predominantly oral culture.

While this conclusion is broadly assumed, biblical scholars have not fully appreciated or exploited this basic observation. In fact, development of oral theory has progressed somewhat slowly within the arena of biblical studies. As Walter Ong observes, although 'oral tradition is no new concept in biblical studies' the 'development of the concept has progressed unevenly' (1983: xiii). Some would even argue that biblical scholars have been 'resisting' the implication of this thesis for some time (Horsley and Draper 1999: 6). Perhaps this is due to the challenge of hypothesizing about *oral* traditions from *textual* artifacts—a daunting task by any standard. Or it may be that progress has been hampered by modern chirographic proclivities and the realization that we simply 'do not know how to imagine the oral period' (Sanders and Davies 1989: 141). Whatever the reason for this 'uneven' development, many scholars are beginning to realize that an understanding of orality is essential for appreciating early Christianity. As Dunn suggests, 'we *must* endeavor to "imagine the oral period" for the sake of historical authenticity, to re-envisage how tradition was transmitted in an orally structured society' (2003a: 149; original emphasis).

Recent research has shed considerable light on oral tradition, and biblical scholars are now in a position to understand better the oral milieu that shaped the Jesus material than ever before. Accordingly, the objective of this article is to provide a broad overview of the recent developments in orality studies, as well as to provide a bibliography for additional study. Although oral tradition impacts the whole of biblical studies, the focus of this essay is on developments within the Gospels over the last thirty years. Due to the scope of such an endeavor, the following survey is by no means exhaustive, but rather aims to trace the key figures and works that have advanced the discussion of oral tradition in Gospel studies.

## *Precursors to Advancement in the Gospels*

The rise of form criticism in the early twentieth century was instrumental in calling attention to the role of oral tradition in the formation of the Gospels. In his classic study, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Bultmann states that one of the objectives of form criticism is to give an account of 'how

the tradition passed from a fluid state to the fixed form in which it meets us in the Synoptics' (1963: 3). Despite this aim, however, Bultmann and the form critics were not able to untangle themselves from a post-Gutenberg perspective and did not bequeath an understanding of orality that provides the basis for contemporary discussions of the subject. Instead, advances in other fields, such as classics, sociology and social anthropology, have more directly shaped current discussions of orality and the Gospels. While this essay is concerned primarily with the impact of these studies upon the Gospels, a few brief remarks are in order concerning four scholars whose pioneering research plays a key role in contemporary discussions of orality and the Gospels.

*Milman Parry and Albert Lord*

Interest in oral theory—for scholars across a host of disciplines—is a relatively recent phenomenon that was set in motion by the trailblazing work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Parry's specific research interest was the performance of the Homeric epics, and in particular, the question of whether oral performance was derived from the recall of a memorized text or generated at the moment of delivery (1930, 1932, 1933). Parry's query led him to the former Yugoslavia to study poetry within the context of a highly illiterate, oral culture in order to better understand the dynamics of epic performance. Based upon his research, Parry concluded that the characteristics of the Homeric epics, including the use of formulaic language and meter, were dictated by the demands of oral composition and were not the result of a literary genius. Instead, Parry argued that the epics were spontaneously constructed from prefabricated material that the oral poet wove together from stock phrases and words. Unfortunately, Parry died unexpectedly before his findings were complete, though his son later assembled a collection of his father's works that included some previously unpublished research (A. Parry 1971).

Parry's research was carried forward by one of his students, Albert Lord, who assisted Parry in Yugoslavia and later completed doctoral studies at Harvard. Lord was able to demonstrate on a much broader scale what came to be referred to as the 'Parry-Lord theory' or 'oral-formulaic theory' (Lord 1960, 1978, 1981). Lord, following in the footsteps of Parry, argued that the oral performance of epic poetry was not based upon a prescripted, written text but was constructed by the assembly of formulaic sayings. Music typically accompanied the performance to provide the 'singer' with the rhythm and inspiration to creatively assemble the traditional formulas (1960: 126).

Although the singer simultaneously functioned as a composer, performer and poet (1960: 13), Lord argued that the relationship between oral and written media was conflictive since the singer could not be 'both an oral and a written poet at any given time' (1960: 129). Lord further argued, in *The Singer of Tales* (1960), that the theory postulated by Parry was applicable not only to Homeric epics but also to other works such as *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland* and *Digenis Akritas*.

Scholars of various disciplines are indebted to the work of Parry and Lord, and it is telling that the former has been called the 'Darwin of oral literature' (Levin 1960: xv). While the Parry-Lord theory has been nuanced and many, if not most, scholars are no longer comfortable drawing a sharp distinction between orality and textuality, 'the building blocks for the Parry-Lord model remain, and have proven immensely useful: improvisation in performance, the use of formulas and themes, the additive mode, [and] the use of an archaic or obscure language' (de Vet 2008: 161). Ultimately, Parry's and Lord's research had important ramifications for challenging form-critical assumptions, as well as for understanding Synoptic origins and relationships. Lord eventually applied his understanding of oral tradition to the Gospels, noting 'I have seen reason to believe that the Synoptic Gospels exhibit certain characteristics of oral traditional literature' (1978: 90).

*Eric Havelock*

In *Preface to Plato* (1963), Eric Havelock explores the broader implications of the oral-formulaic theory. Parry and Lord had shown that the Homeric poems made wide use of formulaic phrases, a practice not valued in overwhelmingly literate cultures, but one in which, Havelock suggests, was vital to oral culture where knowledge acquisition and retention were dependent upon frequent recitation and mnemonic thought patterns. In view of this legitimate need for stereotypical language, Havelock seeks to unravel Plato's invective against the poetic experience in the tenth book of the *Republic.* For although Plato recognizes that poets function as collectors of knowledge and are 'a kind of social encyclopedia' for the benefit of society, he also considers their work 'at best frivolous and at worst dangerous both to science and to morality' (Havelock 1963: 29-31, 3-4).

The solution to this problem, Havelock suggests, must be understood within the context of broader historical phenomena. Havelock argues that by Plato's day the culture was beginning—following several centuries after the introduction of the Greek alphabet (720–700 BCE)—to experience the developmental effects of an interiorized language cultivated by writing.

Caught within broader cultural trends, Plato polemicizes against the poets because they embodied the oral culture with its inclination for the formulaic and clichéd phrase. Such data collection and mode of thinking was, according to Plato, a way of the past— 'a kind of psychic poison'—that was being replaced by the written word (1963: 5). As Havelock observes, a major paradigm shift was underway:

> We must realize that works of genius, composed within the semi-oral tradition, though a source of magnificent pleasure to the modern reader of ancient Greek, constituted or represented a total state of mind which is not our mind and which was not Plato's mind; and that just as poetry itself, as long as it reigned supreme, constituted the chief obstacle to the achievement of effective prose, so that there was a state of mind which we shall conveniently label the 'poetic' or 'Homeric' or 'oral' state of mind, which constituted the chief obstacle to scientific rationalism, to the use of analysis, to the classification of experience, to its rearrangement in sequence of cause and effect. This is why the poetic state of mind is for Plato the arch-enemy and it is easy to see why he considered this enemy so formidable (1963: 46-47).

Plato's rejection of the poets and their oral mindset, Havelock argues, marks the dawn of a new era. Unable to think in abstract terms, to distance themselves from the object of their knowledge, the oral poets came to represent for Plato the simplistic and uninspired thinking characterizing the oral period.

Havelock's work is important for orality studies because he is able to describe the effects of writing, as well as the distinct characteristics of the oral mindset. Though some have suggested that Havelock overemphasized Plato's portrayal of the poets and that Plato was in fact skeptical of the written medium (Anderson 1989), his research represents a significant milestone in orality studies. What is more, Havelock's work has become foundational for scholars seeking to identify elements of oral tradition in the Gospels (Bryan 1993: 67-81).

### *Walter Ong*

Parry, Lord and Havelock made significant progress in understanding ancient orality, simultaneously challenging scholarly presuppositions and raising a host of questions about the relationship between orality and writing. In what became the next stage of the orality evolution, Walter Ong took a further step forward by examining the profound impact of writing upon the human psyche. In *Orality and Literacy* (1982), a book that would have important repercussions in the field of biblical studies, Ong argued that a fundamental distinction exists in the management of information

between cultures governed by 'primary orality' (i.e., cultures where the majority of people are completely unfamiliar with writing) and 'secondary orality' (i.e., cultures where the majority of people are literate, but still engage in oral communication) (1982: 6, 136).

Ong's most significant contribution was in identifying what he deemed the 'psychodynamics of orality', the defining characteristics of oral cultures. Unlike Parry and Lord whose work was based upon comparisons with specific cultures, Ong attempted to cast the net in a broader fashion by describing the general implications of orality for pre-literate people, irrespective of geographic or temporal locale. Besides underscoring the importance of sound and mnemonics in oral cultures, Ong suggested a number of distinctive features that characterize the oral perspective: (1) an additive rather than subordinating style, (2) an aggregative rather than an analytic form of expression, (3) a tendency for the redundant, (4) a conservative outlook, (5) expression corresponding to the human life world, (6) an agonistic tone, (7) a participatory rather than an objective perspective, (8) a homeostatic orientation and (9) a concrete rather than an abstract mode of thinking (1982: 31-77). These characteristics, Ong argued—once plunged to the depths of literacy—are forever altered by the dramatic restructuring of the human mind for 'more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness' (1982: 78).

*Orality and Literacy* was not Ong's first venture into the field of orality studies (1967, 1977). It is, though, his most influential work and an apt description of the impact that the technology of writing has upon human patterns of thinking. Like his predecessors, and like most advancements in knowledge that challenge long-standing paradigms, Ong pushed the boundaries of understanding and articulated ideas that have since been reexamined. Today many scholars do not think that it is possible to speak about 'the oral mindset' or 'oral tradition' as though it is governed by universal principles applicable to all peoples as Ong describes. Haring, for instance, insists that 'commonsense anthropology will have to agree that there are no universal or invariant themes, techniques, or devices of literary art, whether oral or written. Each culture operates differently in the realm of verbal art' (1998: 37). However, while Haring expresses a view that seems to undermine Ong's proposal, it does not minimize his original contribution, nor does it fundamentally undermine Ong's description of the characteristics that distinguish at least *some* people in cultures governed by primary and secondary orality.

In their own unique ways, Parry, Lord, Havelock and Ong were trailblazers in the study of orality and their research has had a profound impact

upon a variety of disciplines, including folklore, history and anthropology. As orality studies have unfolded in broad conversation, many other scholars could have been mentioned in this section (Vansina 1965, 1985; Goody and Watt 1968; Finnegan 1970, 1974, 1977, 1988, 1990, 1992; Peabody 1975; Goody 1977; Foley 1988, 1990, 1991, 1995, 1999, 2002). Nonetheless, the relatively recent interest in oral tradition is due in no small part to the work of Parry, Lord, Havelock and Ong, who collectively propelled the scholarly world to think anew about the relationship between orality and literacy, ultimately prompting the reevaluation of oral tradition in NT studies.

## *Reconceiving Orality and the Gospels*

It was only a matter of time before NT scholars began to capitalize upon the body of research spearheaded by Parry, Lord, Havelock and Ong. These methodological advancements had a direct impact upon the reconception of orality in NT studies, resulting in a paradigm shift that is still being played out today. As NT scholars began to interact with this research, it became apparent that many of the orality models within the field had been erroneously and uncritically assumed. Recent studies concerning the interplay between orality and the Gospels, several of which are noted below, are indebted to these foundational works.

### *Werner Kelber*

Werner Kelber is typically regarded as 'the first to recognize that the Gospels were composed and received in a world dominated by oral communication' (Horsley 2006: viii). Indeed, some would argue that Kelber 'almost single-handedly pioneered the effort' in the field of biblical studies (Horsley and Draper 1999). While Kelber was not the first to observe that an oral tradition lay behind the text (Culley 1986), he was the first to champion the development of an oral hermeneutic. Kelber first explored the subject in article entitled 'Mark and Oral Tradition' (1979), but it was his groundbreaking book in 1983, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*, that most directly challenged the chirographic predilection of biblical scholars and reinvigorated the discussion of oral backgrounds.

Drawing upon a growing body of research by classicists and folklorists (e.g., Parry, Lord, Havelock, Ong, Finnegan and Goody), Kelber offered a penetrating critique of the transmission models espoused by Rudolf

Bultmann (1963) and Birger Gerhardsson (1961), two scholars whose influential and opposing views had shaped the discussion of oral traditions in NT studies. Kelber's critical assessment of the form-critical approach focused on Bultmann's failure to account for the dynamics of orality and its relationship to written modes of communication. Like Güttgemanns (1970), Kelber skillfully marshaled developments in orality studies to challenge the underlying assumptions of form criticism. Most problematic, according to Kelber, was Bultmann's assumption of a smooth and uneventful transition between the oral and written gospel (Bultmann 1963: 48).

Bultmann theorized that the principles exhibited in Matthew's and Luke's redaction of Mark and Q revealed the manner in which the pre-gospel traditions were shaped in oral history. Bultmann insisted that 'if we are able to detect any such laws [in the development of the textual tradition], we may assume that they were operative on the traditional material even before it was given its form in Mark and Q, and in this way we can infer back to an earlier stage of the tradition than appears in our sources' (1963: 6). In effect, Bultmann began his quest to ascertain the pure forms by working backwards from the written tradition to the oral tradition. As Kelber observed, this hermeneutical retrojection was erroneously based upon the assumption that the mode of communication was irrelevant for ascertaining the tradition in its pre-written stages of development: 'More than anything else one must question Bultmann's failure to appreciate the actuality of living speech as distinct from written texts. Fundamentally what is being put in question here is ... a tendency to minimize the effect of the transition from oral motion to textual still life' (1983: 8).

In addition, following E.P. Sanders (1969) Kelber noted that the foundation of Bultmann's model was not actually derived from an examination of folk literature (1983: 7). The propensity for growth and expansion of the tradition—a central thesis of the form-critics that explained the development from individual sayings to the complexification of the Gospels—was never established by Bultmann as an observable tendency in folklore. Somewhat ironically, while Bultmann (1963: 6-7) recognized the value of analyzing comparative literature for the purposes of observing the general laws of transmission, his interpretive principles were derived almost exclusively from his examination of the Synoptic tradition, with little or no comparison of the phenomena in non-Christian traditions. As Kelber rightly demonstrated, Bultmann did not appreciate the oral dynamics in non-Christian literature and instead presupposed that the textual proclivities of the evangelists were the same as those that governed the tradition in the pre-gospel, oral stages of development.

In response to Bultmann's model of transmission, and form criticism in general, Gerhardsson offered a competing paradigm that both challenged Bultmann's portrayal of the transmission process and affirmed the historical reliability of the received tradition. Gerhardsson described a model of orality that was based upon his analysis of Rabbinic Judaism of the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods (1961: 30). This Jewish backdrop provided the context in which Jesus was enculturated, and although the Synoptics provide relatively scant data regarding the particular manner in which Jesus taught, Gerhardsson maintained that 'the sources do not suggest that Jesus used any method radically different from that which was normal in his milieu' (1961: 326). The model of transmission exhibited in Rabbinic Judaism was thus an appropriate parallel for the process at work among Jesus and the early Christians. The tradition passed down, without distortion, directly from Jesus to his disciples, whose capacity as authority figures insured the faithful and deliberate transmission of the tradition. Like the Rabbis, Gerhardsson argued, Jesus 'required his disciples to memorize' and considering 'the attitude of Jewish disciples to their masters, it is unrealistic to suppose that forgetfulness and the exercise of a pious imagination had too much hand in transforming authentic memories beyond all recognition in the course of a few short decades' (1961: 328-29).

Gerhardsson's model, though problematic in many respects, was praised by Kelber for advancing the discussion of orality. Gerhardsson was appreciative of the fact that 'words were meant to *sound*', and further that ancient literature was not intended for silent, private reading, but was 'intended for the ears as much as, if not more than, the eyes' (1961: 163). Moreover, Gerhardsson recognized that in a predominantly oral culture mnemonic techniques, such as rhythm, catchwords and the arrangement of material based upon associations, are necessary for the retention and transmission of tradition (1961: 148-49).

Yet despite these advances, Kelber writes, 'these insights which could have inspired a model of oral transmission more in accord with contemporary studies in orality remained incidental to his central thesis of a passive and authoritative transmission of traditions' (1983: 13). Most troublesome for Kelber was the dubious assumptions underlying Gerhardsson's model, notably the backdating of Rabbinic documents to the time of Jesus (a fallacious point of contention first raised by Morton Smith [1963] but later clarified by Gerhardsson [1991, 2001] and conceded by others [Neusner 1998]) and the lack of evidence depicting Jesus as a Rabbinic-like teacher who enforced the strict memorization of oral traditions. What is more, as Kelber suggests, the model suffered from a decidedly textual bias. Not

only did Gerhardsson begin with written texts, he assumed that the traditions passed down by memorization were typically dependent upon written texts. In the end, though Gerhardsson affirmed the place of orality in the Synoptic tradition, he distorted the line between oral and written modes of communication by assuming that both were transmitted by the mechanism of verbatim memorization.

Gerhardsson's model of passive reception differed quite significantly from Bultmann's model of aggregate growth, but neither theory, according to Kelber, offered a viable solution to the question of oral backgrounds. In the final analysis, both theories faltered on two shared assumptions—(1) the suggestion that there was no 'definable boundary between oral and written tradition' (Bultmann 1963: 321) and (2) that the transmission process flowed in a linear, unimpeded fashion. This foundational critique, this 'concern for what seemed... a disproportionately print-oriented hermeneutic' (Kelber 1983: xv), was the impetus for Kelber's research and the starting point for his own attempt to understand the oral dynamics at work in the Gospels (and Paul).

Central to Kelber's proposal was the elemental distinction between oral and written modes of communication, a notion that had been repeatedly underscored by scholars of orality but largely overlooked in the field of biblical studies. While Kelber recognized that the precise relationship between the spoken and written word remains a highly contentious matter, he argued that the essential distinction is widely affirmed (1983: 14). For Kelber, this differentiation between oral and written modes of communication is rooted in the communicative act. Oral performers are burdened by the transitory nature of spoken words that 'vanish at the moment of their utterance' (1983: 1). Unlike readers, a audience cannot turn back the printed page to review material, but instead must rely upon linguistic devices within the presentation to facilitate remembrance. The survival of the spoken word is dependent, in large measure, upon the speaker's ability to employ mnemonic devices and formulaic speech in concert with the kind of information that is adaptable in an oral context. For the speaker, 'what is transmitted orally, therefore, is never all the information available, but only the kind of data that are orally pliable and retrievable' (Kelber 1983: 15).

The use of mnemonic aids to facilitate retention is vital to the longevity of a tradition, but equally important, if not more so according to Kelber, is the social relevancy of a given tradition (1983: 24). Though odd and unusual traditions might be remembered due to their sheer foreignness, more generally the survival of the spoken word is dependent upon the law

of social identification. The relevancy of the performance and the speaker's ability to connect with an audience are critical to preservation since a 'tradition that cannot overcome the social threshold to communal reception is doomed to extinction' (1983: 29). Stories and sayings are more likely to be retained when they resonate with an audience and strike a responsive chord in people's hearts. Moreover, traditions that are remembered are passed down to others, thus setting in motion a cycle of oral transmission.

The journey of an oral tradition, however, is non-linear and may undergo a multitude of potential changes due to what Kelber terms 'preventive censorship' (1983: 29). In order to ensure the social significance and viability of the tradition, stories are expanded, the sequence is altered, details are abandoned, or themes are developed—to name just a few possible alterations. Though often the movement is towards abbreviation and simplification, the process resists mechanical and linear explanation. Depending upon the circumstances of oral performance, some traditions pass through history relatively unaltered, while others are discarded or undergo radical modification.

Tangential to the notion of non-linear development, Kelber argues (following Parry and Lord) that the concept of an 'original' is an erroneous construct applied anachronistically from literary models of evolutionary development. Each oral performance is a unique and original creation in its own right: 'if, for example, Jesus spoke a saying more than once, the first utterance did not produce "the original," nor was the second one a "variant" thereof, because each moment of speech is wondrously fresh and new' (Kelber 1983: 30). Though traditions are transmitted, they are not passed down as sayings and stories that cannot be adapted to social needs. On the contrary, social identification demands that each performance be adapted to the needs of a particular audience. Each presentation is not merely the recitation of received tradition, but an authentic speech act that is composed for a specific audience and is to be distinguished from other performances. The notion of an 'original' is a modern conception that simply does not exist in the world of oral culture and reflects a fundamental misconception about the nature of the Jesus traditions.

With respect to the Gospels, Kelber utilizes these cumulative insights to argue for a radical distinction between the pre-Markan oral traditions and the written Markan tradition. Kelber suggests that the interpreter 'may find inscribed in the newly mediated story a rationale for its own medium history' (1983: 129), which he goes on to assert is for the purpose of establishing the new written text (and its representatives) 'over [and] against the prevailing authorities of oral transmission' (1983: 130). In other words, for

Kelber, Mark's use of written media is inextricably linked to his polemic against the disciples, the family of Jesus and Christian prophets who were the guardians of the oral traditions. The technological innovation of Mark's Gospel, a *written* text, compliments the ideological stance of the writer, namely, a decisive rejection and distancing from the oral representatives of the gospel.

Kelber's analysis of Mark and his suggestion that Mark attempts to 'disown the voices of his oral precursors' (1983: 104) has, over the years, been vigorously contested. This bifurcation between orality and textuality, the so-called 'Great Divide' (a view indebted to Parry and Lord), has been regarded as an oversimplification of the complex realities during this transitional period, and the majority of scholars now prefer to regard these elements as operating on a continuum (Swearingen 1986; Aune 1991: 240; de Vet 2008: 160-61). In addition, Kelber's thesis appears to contradict itself since the *written* text of Mark's Gospel would have, in all likelihood, been re-oralized in future performances, thus reestablishing the very method of traditioning that Kelber claims the evangelist attempts to discredit (Mournet 2005: 84-85). While Kelber has sought to downplay this stark contrast in subsequent writings, noting that his (over)emphasis in the book was for rhetorical purposes to break through the dominant, print-oriented hermeneutic (1994: 159), more recently he has reasserted this position and stated that he 'does not rule out the possibility of a *conflictual* relationship between oral and written' (2008: 30; original emphasis).

Despite this critique, the importance of Kelber's contribution stands, and most would acknowledge—as the title of a recent interview with Kelber affirms—that 'It's Not Easy to Take a Fresh Approach' (2008). There is little doubt that when thinking about the history of orality studies in Gospels research, terms such as 'watershed' and 'turning point' are justifiably applied to *The Oral and the Written Gospel*. Indeed, many would insist that 'when all is said and done, Kelber's contribution remains, to this day, the single most important and influential work on oral tradition' (Mournet 2005: 86).

*Joanna Dewey*

Following Kelber's seminal work, Dewey (1989) sets out to demonstrate that Mark's Gospel, when examined as a whole, evidences the kinds of techniques found among oral narratives. In contrast to Kelber, Dewey argues that the distinction between media, and more specifically the transition to textuality, should not be pressed too far. The shift from oral to written traditions occurred over a protracted period of time, suggesting that

in textual artifacts such as the Gospels scholars should expect to find the residual effects of the oral traditioning process.

The hermeneutical principles underlying Dewey's analysis of Mark are drawn primarily from the influential work of Havelock (1963), who argues that at the heart of Plato's invective against poetry (or mimesis) is a rejection of his contemporaries' oral mindset. In order to show that Mark's Gospel retains many of the characteristics employed in oral media, Dewey compares those features of oral composition (rejected by Plato) with the Markan narrative. In particular, Dewey focuses her discussion on three characteristics of poetry that necessitate its dismissal, according to Plato, as 'an illusion of reality' and 'a phantom of virtue' (1989: 34).

First, oral tradition is typically preserved as happenings or short episodes (1989: 35). As most scholars would acknowledge, there is little doubt that Mark's Gospel satisfies this first criteria, save the two extended discourses in Mark 4 and 13. However, as Dewey observes, even these teaching blocks incorporate oral methods of structuring. Mark 4 contains a number of distinct parables that inherently function as short stories. Likewise, while Mark 13, the apocalyptic discourse, does not contain parables, it does employ a number of mnemonic devices such as chiasm, ring composition and verbal echoes, all of which would contribute to retention of the tradition in an oral context.

The second feature that delineates mimesis is concern for the visual since episodes that capitalize on the audience's ability to 'see' facilitate retention of the tradition (1989: 36). Beyond the episodic nature of Mark's narrative, the various healings, controversy stories and tumultuous sea journeys inevitably conjure up images that allow the listener to imagine the unfolding scenes. In this respect, Mark's Gospel is replete with visual imagery, which as Dewey observes, would have positively affected an audience's oral remembering.

The third characteristic of poetry, according to Plato, consists of the many, or what Ong (1982: 37-39) notes is a tendency of oral narratives to be additive and aggregative in nature. What this means is that episodes are structured in paratactic fashion with little concern for subordination or the demonstration of cause and effect relationships. Dewey points out that of the thirteen scenes that are introduced in Mark 1–2, eleven begin with the connective καί (*kai*, 'and'). More specifically, the episode describing John's arrest and death is withheld until Mark 6 in order to provide the audience with the necessary information for Herod's belief that John has been raised from the dead. This deliberate strategy, rather than narrating the sequence in chronological order following the first mention of John's arrest in Mk 1.14, is further evidence

that the Gospel exhibits a non-linear development that is characteristic of oral narratives. Dewey then demonstrates that the narrative is woven together, both at the macro and micro level, by various acoustic techniques that provide a verbal echo of material already encountered, while simultaneously anticipating further developments in the narrative to come (1989: 38-42). This 'variation within the same'—manifest throughout Mark's Gospel—is a key characteristic of oral narrative (1989: 38).

Dewey's work makes an important contribution to Gospel studies. She convincingly argues that Mark's Gospel as a whole, not simply a few individual episodes, is infused with techniques intended to aid a listening audience and, unlike Kelber, she advocates a more balanced approach to the relationship between oral and written media. While Mark is a written text, it betrays the 'considerable overlap between orality and textuality' (1989: 33). Where Dewey is in agreement with Kelber, and where her work clearly points, is the pressing need for scholars 'to take the dynamics of orality much more seriously in interpreting' the Gospels 'and in reconstructing early Christian history' (1989: 42). Dewey's subsequent research has sought to fill this gap (1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b).

*Paul Achtemeier*

Kelber's bifurcation between oral and written modes of communication receives an even more sustained challenge by Achtemeier in '*Omne verbum sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity' (1990). The essence of Achtemeier's argument is that during the period in which the documents of the NT were composed, written communication was heavily influenced by a 'residual orality' that affected 'the way communication was carried on by means of written media' (1990: 3). While offering a further corrective to Kelber, Achtemeier demonstrates that the NT does not merely incorporate oral techniques, as though they were unconsciously wedded to a new mode of written communication, but that the writers of the NT intentionally utilized oral compositional devices.

Achtemeier begins his study by exploring the way in which written documents were produced and how these texts were subsequently read. Although only a small percentage of the population was capable of reading or writing, there was no lack of written documents, nor typically were the materials necessary for the production of scrolls or codices difficult to ascertain. These written documents, however, were not composed in silence as is customary in the modern era, but were dictated to scribes or verbalized as individuals engaged in the act of writing.

> The oral environment was so pervasive that *no* writing occurred that was not vocalized. That is obvious in the case of dictation, but it was also true in the case of writing in one's own hand. Even in that endeavor, the words were simultaneously spoken as they were committed to writing, whether one wrote one's own words or copied those of another... When Luke describes Zechariah writing the name of his son on the tablet, Luke's Greek (1.63, ἔγραφεν λέγων; *egrapsen legon*—'he wrote, saying') demonstrates that it was the act of *writing* that proved his speech had been restored! In the last analysis, dictation was the only means of writing; it was only a question of whether one dictated to another or to oneself (1990: 15; original emphasis).

Not only did orality play an integral part in the production of written documents, it also was central to the practice of reading. Achtemeier goes on to show that reading in the ancient world was almost always vocalized. While public readings were, quite obviously, oral presentations, it is also true that private, individual readings involved oral recitation of the written word. Thus, written texts typically functioned as a platform for oral performance, a process Margaret Mills terms 're-oralization' (1990). Accordingly, it is understandable why Philip *overheard* the Ethiopian eunuch *reading* from the book of Isaiah in Acts 8.30: the scene records the common, orally-based practice of reading in antiquity (1990: 16).

The implication of these observations is that the NT documents 'apart from any unique characteristics they may possess in the matter of form or language... are oral to the core, both in their creation and in their performance' (1990: 19). These texts, Achtemeier argues, must fundamentally be understood within the sphere of oral/aural communication rather than in strictly chirographic terms, as has generally been the case among NT scholars. Achtemeier concludes with a survey of various passages, all of which illustrate that the documents of the NT are inscribed with a host of oral/aural clues, including repetition (anaphora, parallelism and *inclusio*) and alliteration, in order to facilitate understanding among a listening audience (1990: 19-25).

Achtemeier's analysis counters the exaggerated dichotomy between orality and textuality proposed by Kelber and convincingly demonstrates that the authors of the NT did not unwittingly codify features from a passing mode of communication, but deliberately incorporated these elements into their writings in order to assist a listening audience. Achtemeier concludes the article by pointing forward to the potential application of oral theory to the perennial question about the nature and use of sources in the NT and the Gospels—an issue that would be taken up with much vigor in subsequent years.

*Peter Botha*

Peter Botha's 1991 article 'Mark's Story as Oral Traditional Literature' furthers the exploration of oral backgrounds and advances the conversation in an innovative manner. As the subtitle suggests—'Rethinking the Transmission of Some Traditions about Jesus'—Botha went beyond the work of Kelber (1983: 77-80) and Dewey (1989: 43-44), who despite their differences concerning the relative continuity between oral and written media both argued that the Gospel does not appear to be a text that was orally composed, even though Mark evidences techniques of oral composition.

Botha's main contribution was to apply the Parry-Lord theory 'to discuss the possibility of seeing prominent characteristics of the Gospel of Mark as textual symptoms of... [oral] composition' (1991: 314). Though other scholars had come to similar conclusions, including Herder (1880) and Boman (1967), Botha appropriated aspects of the oral-formulaic theory to better understand and identify the compositional technique behind Mark's Gospel. Unlike Kelber (1983: 78) who claims that the theory, while helpful, is not directly applicable to the Gospels, Botha argues that there are enough points of contact to indirectly apply the oral-formulaic theory.

After establishing the methodological basis for his study, Botha observes that certain features in Mark's story display characteristics that are in line with the traditioning process assumed by the Parry-Lord theory. He points specifically to stylized expressions that 'leap to the tongue', rhythmical wording and the use of certain phrases that 'suggest an almost involuntary repetition' (1991: 318-19). In addition, he suggests that the use of themes and motifs in Mark is in keeping with the oral-formulaic theory. The repeated use of compositional themes and type scenes suggest that there is a 'comparable identity' between episodes indicating that the 'narratives within the story influenced one another and could have—in terms of the oral formulaic theory—"created" one another' (1991: 320).

Botha concludes from this that Mark 'is a transcription of what had been performed orally' (1991: 322) and was likely codified after a traditional narrator dictated the Gospel to a scribe. Although Botha is careful to nuance his view and is somewhat hesitant about using the oral-formulaic theory to test a document's orality (1991: 313), his assessment of Markan origins is largely dependent upon this methodology. 'Mark does not merely contain oral traditions, but is oral composition' that 'probably reflects an improvisatory composition and re-composition within an informal context under the constraints of various traditions' (1991: 324, 322). Of course, Botha's thesis cannot be proven, and perhaps it is more appropriate to envision what Robbins terms a 'rhetorical culture', a social world characterized by a fluid and symbiotic relationship between oral and written media (1993:

116). At the very least, however, Botha's research further establishes the oral techniques inherent in the Gospels and the legitimacy of applying oral theory to the study of the traditions about Jesus.

*Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper*

Just as orality studies have resulted in a major reevaluation of the Gospels, so too have they impacted discussion of Q, the hypothesized 'Sayings Gospel' behind the shared traditions of Matthew and Luke. In *Whoever Hears You Hears Me*, Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper challenge the widely-held assumption 'that Q can and should be dealt with as if it were a written text, as opposed to oral tradition' (1999: 3). Although a healthy portion of the book engages in the critical assessment of various theological and historical assumptions that presently undergird Q research, the authors' overarching objective is to consider Q as a series of orally-derived discourses within the context of a performance event.

Perhaps of greatest importance to the present discussion is Horsley's and Draper's insightful adaptation of recent developments in oral theory. The authors rely heavily upon the work of John Miles Foley (1991, 1995), who proposes a model based upon oral-formulaic theory, ethnography and ethnopoetics. Essentially, Foley argues that the use of formulaic expressions creates 'rich and complex meanings' by the process of metonymic referencing, whereby a particular saying stands in the place of a broader tradition (1991: 5). Thus, in an oral context, meaning is generated by the use of formulaic speech that metonymically evokes extratextual connotations from the shared traditions of the audience and the performer. By incorporating the receptionalist literary theories of Iser (1971, 1974, 1978) and Jauss (1982), both of whom argue that the construction of meaning is dynamically generated through the interaction between text and reader and that the reader is drawn into the process via 'gaps of indeterminacy', Foley argues that audiences in an oral environment are not passive spectators but active participants in the performance event. In a chapter entitled 'Recent Studies of Oral-Derived Literature and Q', Horsley concludes that:

> By comparison with readers of modern literature, the hearers of performances or 'readers' of oral traditional 'texts' must participate far more actively in realizing the work, and far more actively than scholars interested only in analysis of an artifact … Only if the connection between text and the metonymically signaled references to the tradition is made or retained, can the work that depends on that connection be realized. The 'reader' unacquainted with the tradition 'will be unable to construe the work within the range of possibilities implied by the text' (Horsley and Draper 1999: 162).

Draper, in a subsequent chapter, expands upon this model in conversation with the social linguistic theory of Halliday (1978), who describes a general model of communication from which models of oral and literary communication can be derived. Draper notes that among the various aspects within the communicative event, the concept of a register— 'the configuration of language appropriate to the particular type of situation or context' (Horsley and Draper 1999: 181)—plays an important role in discerning oral communication within written texts. Although Draper is clearly aware that 'the relationship between the oral and written media is complex and interrelated', he argues that a fundamental distinction exists between the oral and written registers that allows the scholar to reconstruct oral performances from textual artifacts, based upon indicators such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme, tonal repetition, parallelism and rhythm, as well as traces of features typically obscured by written communication, including singing, dramatization and audience response (Horsley and Draper 1999: 183-84).

Beyond the measurable contribution that Horsley and Draper make to the study of Q and its social context, focusing attention on the performance of Q and the interplay between performer, text and audience, their research has much broader implications for biblical studies. Horsley's and Draper's wedding of oral and literary theories is insightful and points forward to future avenues of exploration both in the Gospels and in the rest of the NT. In particular, their research suggests that scholars must delve even deeper into the relational experiences that shaped performers and their audiences—a notion that ultimately raises questions about the impact of cultural memory on the traditioning process.

## *Implications for the Gospels*

While discussion about the hermeneutics of orality is ongoing, more recent studies have tended to focus upon the interpretive implications of this research. As a result of the methodological groundwork that has been forged, there is renewed interest in seeking to utilize the oral context from which the Gospels arose as a means to (re)interpret the ancient texts. Thus, although the arrangement of this material is somewhat artificial since virtually all studies cross back and forth between theory and practice, there appears to be a discernable shift in recent studies to the application of oral theory. Interestingly, the focus upon the implication of orality has spawned two seemingly divergent but not unrelated avenues of research in Gospel studies. The first revolves around the perennial question of the character

and reliability of the Jesus tradition, while the second seeks to understand the performance of the Gospel in an oral/aural context.

*Reliability of the Jesus Tradition*

*Kenneth F. Bailey.* In 1991, Kenneth Bailey published what was to become an important article exploring the intersection between contemporary Middle Eastern orality and the Synoptic Gospels. Endeavoring to chart a mediating position between Bultmann and Gerhardsson, Bailey proposed an alternative model in line with Dodd (1970), based upon community storytelling practices, which he personally observed as a teacher and scholar working in the Middle East for over 37 years.

According to Bailey, orality models revolve around two primary elements. The first characteristic, *informal* or *formal*, describes the social setting for the transmission process. An *informal* tradition is one in which 'there is no identifiable teacher nor student and no structure within which material is passed from one person to another' (1991: 36). On the other hand, a tradition passed down through *formal* means involves 'a clearly identified teacher, a clearly identified student, and a clearly identified block of traditional material that is being passed on from one to the other' (1991: 37). The second defining feature of oral traditioning is what Bailey describes as *controlled* or *uncontrolled*. As the designation suggests, this characteristic identifies whether or not there was any involvement, either by individual tradents or the community, in the regulation of traditions.

Based upon his experience, Bailey describes three models of oral transmission: *informal uncontrolled*, *formal controlled* and *informal controlled*. The *informal uncontrolled* model, according to Bailey, was most reflective of the model espoused by Bultmann and retained a place in Middle Eastern life in what is best described as rumor transmission, often of the type associated with tragedies. For instance, Bailey describes the phenomena in the reporting of local news: 'From 1975 to 1984 the present writer was *awash* in such oral transmission in Beirut, Lebanon. A story of three people killed in a bread line in front of a bakery by a random shell quickly became a story of 300 people massacred in cold blood when the account was retold by angry compatriots of the victims' (1991: 38; original emphasis).

Likewise, Gerhardsson's model, which Bailey described as *formal controlled*, was also firmly established in the Middle East. Bailey recounts his own experience in Cairo while studying under Shaykh Sayyed, an Islamic scholar who had committed to memory both the entire Qur'an and the *Alfiyat Ibn Malik*, a collection of grammatical principles encompassing one thousand couplets. During his time of study under Sayyed, Bailey recounts

how he would often bring a particular verse or saying to test his friend's memory. Despite being 75, Bailey found Sayyed to have perfect recall of these extensive documents (1991: 38).

While these particular oral models remain relevant and are still practiced today, Bailey argues that the most appropriate model for understanding the Jesus tradition is the *informal controlled* paradigm. The model is exemplified in contemporary gatherings of Middle Eastern communities, which is known as the *haflat samar*. These meetings are typically held in the evening hours for the purpose of recounting and solidifying important community traditions and are *informal* since no designated tradent or teacher is placed in charge of the proceedings, though typically it is the elder men who are responsible for reciting the traditions of the community (1991: 40).

This informal setting, however, does not imply that traditions are left unchecked; rather the recitation of stories is monitored by the collective oversight of the community. The tradition is *controlled* by the gathered community in accord with the type of tradition being recounted. In particular, Bailey identifies five types of material that are passed down and preserved through *informal controlled* oral tradition: proverbs, story riddles, poetry, parables or stories, and accounts of important historical figures in the life of the community (1991: 41-42). Even more significant, particularly for the application of this model to the Synoptics, is Bailey's observation that the degree of control over any particular oral tradition is dependent upon the kind of material being transmitted. With regard to poems and proverbs, for instance, no degree of flexibility is permitted. If an individual reciting a piece of poetry or proverb makes even a single mistake, he or she will be immediately corrected by the seated community. A modicum of flexibility is permitted with the telling of parables and stories about important community figures. For this type of tradition, the one reciting the material is afforded a degree of interpretive creativity, but only as long as the essential elements of the story are retained. As Bailey aptly remarks, with this type of oral tradition there is 'continuity and flexibility... not continuity and change' (1991: 44). The only scenario where information at the *haflat samar* is passed along without any form of control is material that '*is irrelevant to the identity of the community* and is not judged *wise or valuable*' (1991: 45; original emphasis), such as in the telling of jokes or the recounting of casual news.

Bailey concludes that the *informal controlled* oral tradition provides a working model that addresses longstanding issues in Gospels scholarship and was a practice of tradition transmission employed in the villages of Palestine prior to the Jewish-Roman war. While Bailey's argument is

largely anecdotal, and the author makes no attempt to provide a detailed analysis of the model in light of specific Synoptic texts, the cumulative force of this work is compelling. In contrast to Bultmann and Gerhardsson, Bailey is able to a chart a mediating position that appreciates more fully the flexibility and diversity within the Synoptic tradition as well as the continuity and controls placed upon the transmission of the Jesus material. Although Bailey's original article was published in a relatively obscure journal and its significance was not immediately recognized, after subsequent publications (1995a, 1995b) and the adoption of his model by several widely-published scholars (Wright 1996; Dunn 2003b), this study has become an important work in historical Jesus research.

*James D.G. Dunn.* Over the years, Dunn has consistently implored NT scholars to give greater regard to the oral dynamics operating within the Jesus tradition (1987, 2003a, 2005). Perhaps his most important contribution to the discussion, however, is in the furtherance of Bailey's *informal controlled* model of oral tradition.

In the chapter entitled 'The Tradition' in *Jesus Remembered*, Dunn explores whether the control and flexibility suggested by Bailey is in fact evidenced within the Synoptic tradition. While recognizing that the available evidence exists in literary form and that scholars cannot be certain about the practices that governed oral traditioning, Dunn, following in the steps of Kelber, Dewey and others, begins his study with the assumption that many features and characteristics of the Gospels codify the form in which the Jesus material was transmitted in its oral stage. The study explores a number of texts ranging from traditions in the narrative material (e.g., the centurion's servant [Mt. 8.5-13; Lk. 7.1-10], the stilling of the storm [Mk 4.35-41; Mt. 8.23-27; Lk. 8.22-25] and the Syrophoenician woman [Mk 7.24-30; Mt. 15.21-28]) to the teaching of Jesus (e.g., the Lord's prayer [Mt. 6.7-15; Lk. 11.1-4], the Last Supper [Mk 14.22-25; Mt. 26.26-29; Lk. 22.17-20; 1 Cor. 11.23-26]) as well as other Q traditions.

From this analysis Dunn makes a number of noteworthy conclusions (2003b: 237-54). First, the assumption that Synoptic parallels should and must be examined from a strictly literary perspective oversimplifies a more complex and dynamic mode of transmission. Contrary to those who would discount the importance of orality (Henaut 1993), Dunn argues that it is wrong to assume that a simple, linear progression (i.e., literary dependence) is the only or best way to understand the relationship between the Synoptics, when in fact the texts evidence characteristics of oral communication. Second, although the Synoptics depict different versions of the same story,

they are nonetheless based upon a *shared* tradition. The variations in the Gospels reflect the kind of flexibility expected during a period where the overriding concern was the preservation of the essential features of the story. Although aspects of the story differ, the subject, theme and elemental details are maintained, thus ensuring the retention of the tradition's basic identity. Third, as traditions associated with Jesus were remembered and passed down, subsequent development of those traditions was consistent with the earliest teachings and narratives about Jesus. Dunn explains:

> The concept of oral transmission, as illustrated from the Synoptic tradition itself, therefore, does not encourage either the skepticism which has come to afflict the 'quest for the historical Jesus' or the lopsided findings of the neo-Liberal questers. Rather it points a clear middle way between a model of memorization by rote on the one hand and any impression of oral transmission as a series of evanescent reminiscences of some or several retellings on the other. It encourages neither those who are content with nothing short of the historicity of every detail and word of the text nor those who can see and hear nothing other than the faith of the early churches (2003b: 249).

In other words, traveling evangelists and/or wandering charismatics did not create the Jesus' tradition *ex nihilo*. From the earliest days, Dunn argues, the impact of Jesus' words and deeds became part of a tradition that was alive in the shared memory of the community. Similar to the *haflat shamar*, it was the community that was responsible for the traditioning process. While this does not suggest that the Gospels always record Jesus' words and deeds with complete precision, they do put the reader in touch with the earliest traditions about Jesus.

Dunn has pushed the conversation forward by demonstrating that Bailey's model of oral transmission provides an explanatory power that, although based upon anecdotal stories, is able to address the various phenomena inherent in the Synoptic tradition. Though Weeden (2001a, 2001b, 2009) and Gerhardsson (2005) have vigorously challenged Bailey's model, Dunn has been an ardent defender of its usefulness for understanding the Jesus tradition and the relationship between Synoptic Gospels (2008, 2009). One of Dunn's students, Terence Mournet (2005), has taken his *Doctorvater*'s research a step further and attempted to show that the fixity and flexibility inherent in the double tradition is in line with Dunn's (and Bailey's) thesis from a statistical perspective.

*Richard Bauckham.* In *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Bauckham seeks to offer a way forward through the notoriously polarized discussion concerning history and theology via the concept of testimony, which he suggests offers 'both a reputable historiographic category for reading the Gospels

as history, and also a theological model for understanding the Gospels as the entirely appropriate means of access to the historical reality of Jesus' (2006: 5). Following the works of Bailey and Dunn, Bauckham attempts to locate the early church firmly within its wider oral culture as a means of exploring the reliability of the Jesus tradition. The central argument of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is that the integrity of the Jesus tradition was maintained by authorized tradents who were entrusted with the testimony about Jesus by the original eyewitnesses. As a corollary to this key idea, Bauckham counters a lingering form-critical assumption, namely 'the largely unexamined *impression* that many scholars—and probably even more students—still entertain: the impression of a long period of creative development of the traditions before they attained written form in the Gospels' (2006: 249; original emphasis).

Bauckham's focus on 'the eyewitnesses' builds upon the work of Samuel Byrskog (2000) who examines the importance of 'autopsy' (eyewitness testimony) among Greco-Roman historians such as Thucydides, Polybius, Josephus and Tacitus. Byrskog's study is explored through insights derived from the field of oral history and is for the purpose of understanding the development of the gospel tradition. Most serviceable to Bauckham's thesis is that after establishing the predilection for eyewitness testimony among the ancient historians—as well as the fact that testimony by individuals who participated in the events was no less valued—Byrskog makes a compelling case for a similar reliance upon eyewitness testimony in the formation of the Gospels.

Bauckham develops Byrskog's notion of eyewitness testimony in further and creative directions (e.g., the study of names in the Gospel traditions; 2006: 39-66). However, crucial to this discussion and notable for its originality is the manner in which Bauckham's understanding of the eyewitnesses is developed in relation to his particular model of oral tradition—one that emerges in dialogue with Bailey and Dunn. While appreciative of the respective contribution made by each of these scholars, Bauckham takes note of what he perceives to be a 'serious problem in Dunn's adoption of Bailey's model of *informal controlled* tradition' (2006: 257; original emphasis). In particular, Bauckham argues that Dunn mistakenly assumes that the balance between continuity and flexibility is linked to the *informal* nature of the traditioning process, when actually this characteristic describes the setting in which the traditions are recited (either in a communal context or by individual tradents). Thus, Bauckham suggests that Dunn's preference for the *informal controlled* model confuses Bailey's categories and in so doing inadvertently minimizes the possibility of an altogether different model, which Bailey likewise fails to consider.

> There is no reason why Bailey's account of the balance of stability and flexibility should not be applicable to a *formal* controlled tradition as well as to an *informal* controlled tradition … The balance Bailey describes as characteristic of the processes he has observed could in fact characterize a formal controlled example of oral tradition just as well as an informal controlled example. But the threefold typology has misled readers into supposing that the former is not an option (2006: 258; original emphasis).

In distinction from both Bailey and Dunn, Bauckham argues that the transmission of the Jesus traditions was *formal* and *controlled*. Bauckham's insistence upon a *formal controlled* model serves his broader emphasis upon the eyewitnesses and their continued involvement in the dissemination of the traditions associated with Jesus—a point he argues is obscured or neglected by Bailey and Dunn, both of whom focus on the communal aspect in the traditioning process. Bauckham, however, argues that the traditions originated with individual eyewitnesses who remained guardians of the Jesus tradition. In Christian communities without direct access to the eyewitnesses, authorized tradents were instructed by eyewitnesses (or in some cases other intermediaries) and thereafter functioned as stewards of the tradition in their respective communities (2006: 290).

It must be said that the scope of Bauckham's argument is impressive, and the array of evidence posited in support of his thesis runs from Papias to contemporary discussions of memory. Beyond the arguments that he advances, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* has sparked necessary dialogue concerning the interplay between orality, eyewitnesses and the reliability of the Jesus tradition. Both *JSNT* (Schröter 2008; Evans 2008; Bauckham 2008a) and *JSHJ* (Byrskog 2008; Catchpole 2008; Marshall 2008; Patterson 2008; Weeden 2008; Bauckham 2008b) have each devoted numerous articles to the critical engagement of Bauckham's work. While there is certainly no consensus regarding the foundational claim of Bauckham's thesis—the role of the eyewitnesses—the lively debate tacitly acknowledges the importance of orality in Gospels research.

It should also be noted that despite the scholarly exchange between Bauckham and Dunn (Dunn 2008: 96-105), their competing models should not obscure a shared view of oral tradition. Both Dunn and Bauckham affirm that the Jesus tradition recorded in the Gospels—while not necessarily the *ipsissima verba Jesu* or a precise reflection of the original events—provides reliable testimony concerning the earliest traditions associated with Jesus. It is in this sense, and in view of others who have followed the trajectory of this argument (Eddy and Boyd 2007), that Marshall tentatively asks whether recent studies suggest 'a new consensus on oral tradition?'

(2008). Of course, only time will tell whether we are on the cusp of a 'new consensus', but there is little doubt that recent research has come full-circle from Kelber's assertion that a 'community of early Christians committed to the preservation and transmission of a single [oral] gospel' is an 'unworkable' model (1983: 83, 31).

*Performance Criticism*

The rise in orality studies has begun to foster new conversations about old problems, most notably, the Synoptic Problem and the reliability of the Jesus tradition. It has also generated a new course of inquiry. If the stories about Jesus were transmitted, composed and recounted in an oral culture, then an appreciation of first-century performance must be an integral part of the interpreter's task. Recently, a growing number of scholars have begun to call attention to the performance of the Gospels, an area that has been largely overlooked in NT studies.

*David Rhoads.* David Rhoads, in an informative two-part article on the principles and practices of performance criticism (2006a, 2006b), describes the field as an 'emerging discipline' in Second Testament studies that has been quietly growing for a number of years. Although still a 'blind spot' and 'a rather large lacuna' in Gospel studies (2006a: 119), according to Rhoads (2006a: 120), the methodology was initially explored by members of 'The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media' section at the Society of Biblical Literature and further pursued by scholars such as Boomershine (1987), Dewey (1991, 1992, 1994b), Malbon (1993, 2002), Scott and Dean (1993), Botha (1992, 1993, 2004), and Horsley, Draper and Foley (2006).

Rhoads broadly defines performance as 'any oral telling/retelling of a brief or lengthy tradition—from saying to gospel—in a formal or informal context of a gathered community by trained or untrained performers—on the assumption that every telling was a lively recounting of that tradition' (2006a: 119). Rhoads maintains that performance criticism should be established as a discrete discipline to better understand and interpret the orally-derived texts of the Second Temple period. He is careful, however, to point out that the methodology is informed by and informs a number of existing hermeneutical approaches, including historical criticism, form criticism, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, rhetorical criticism, textual criticism, orality criticism, social-science criticism, speech-act theory, linguistic criticism, ideological criticism and theatre studies (2006b). Rhoads argues that the objective of this eclectic approach is to analyze all the 'elements of the performance event together' in order to construct 'audience scenarios' as a foundation for interpretation (2006a: 131).

Rhoads' involvement with performance criticism is not simply an intellectual fascination but a personal one spanning several decades. In the late 1970s Rhoads committed the Gospel of Mark to memory and began performing in front of students, churches and other groups. Since then he has performed Mark over 200 times, along with a host of other NT books, including Galatians, Philemon, James, 1 Peter and Revelation (2004: 177-78). Though memorizing these texts has been an arduous endeavor, Rhoads insists that storytelling has had a profound impact upon his understanding of the biblical texts and the performative event.

> By taking on the persona/voice of the narrator or speaker in a text, I enter the world of the text, grasp it as a whole, reveal this world progressively in a temporal sequence, attend to every detail, and gain an immediate experience of its rhetoric as a performer seeking to have an impact on an audience. I have gotten in touch with the emotive and kinetic dimensions of the text in ways I would not otherwise have been aware. As I practice performance, the words come off the page and become sounds in my inner hearing before I speak. Eventually, I am no longer seeing words on a page or anticipating sounds in my head. Rather, I imagine the scenes in my mind and I tell/show what I 'see/hear' to a living audience before me (2006a: 120).

Rhoads argues that the experience of performance, the very act itself, is a necessary step in appreciating performance and in utilizing the criticism as a methodological tool for interpretation. For most scholars, having been raised and educated in a print-centric culture, the thought of performing biblical stories is a challenging and frightening proposition. It is understandable then why Rhoads states that 'studying the Second Temple writings as performance literature will involve a radical shift' that requires us 'to rethink our methods, reassess the objects of our study, and develop skills we may not have used before' (2006a: 122).

*Whitney Shiner.* Whitney Shiner's *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark*, though not the first scholarly foray into the subject of oral performance, has become a signature work in the field of performance criticism. It represents one of the first attempts to provide a detailed account of a Gospel (Mark) performance, including 'the manner in which it is told, the whole nature of the performance, the voice and the mimicry, [and] the stimulus and response of the audience' (2003: 2). Shiner argues that, while there is no definitive way to reconstruct a first-century Gospel performance, including the intonation of the voice and the style of delivery, this does not illegitimate the enterprise or the possibility of constructing probable performances of the Gospels. There are, Shiner argues, two very distinct lines of evidence that provide assistance in this endeavor and allow for the plausible

recovery of delivery styles. The first is historical evidence describing ancient rhetorical practices, the appreciation of which facilitates the construction of what Shiner calls an 'ideal performance style' (2003: 4). Second, and equally important, though often overlooked, are the textual clues within the Gospel that aid the performer in the presentation of the story.

Shiner does a masterful job of synthesizing discussions about oral culture, but his primary contribution is in emphasizing the scope of the performance. He notes that ancient performance was dynamic and semi-dramatic, and that the delivery was performed in character, often in a highly emotional and bombastic fashion. To this end, Shiner suggests that 'Mark practically provides stage directions' (2003: 68) as numerous passages depict the various emotions of the characters. Some individuals, for example, are 'amazed' (1.27), filled with 'awe' (4.41) and 'astounded' (6.2). Likewise, Jesus has 'pity' (1.41), speaks 'sternly' (1.43), and is 'indignant' (10.14), 'distressed' and 'agitated' (14.33).

Although Shiner's research underscores the fact that an appreciation of oral culture should necessarily lead to a consideration of the spoken word, his exploration is broader than an analysis of Mark's audible sounds. In addition to discussing how Mark's Gospel might be vocalized, Shiner also examines the use of gestures as a concomitant feature of oral delivery. Whereas words are often bifurcated from discussion of gestures (in a post-Gutenberg culture), the ancients viewed communication as encompassing the whole body (Shiner 2003: 127). Thus, in an impassioned delivery of Mark's story, a first-century audience would expect the performer to utilize gestures—often exaggerated for effect—as an additional means of communicating and providing expression. In this regard, Shiner demonstrates that narrative clues throughout Mark's story provide ample data for the performer to mimic in a performance setting (2003: 135). For example, Jesus 'approaches' Simon's mother-in-law, 'grasps' her by the hand and 'helps her up' (1.31), and the woman with the hemorrhage 'touches' Jesus' cloak (5.27). In each of these scenes, the performer could imitate the actions without disrupting the flow of the story. Certain episodes also lend themselves to the use of rhetorical props, such as the question about paying taxes to Caesar (12.13-17). In a performance context, the use of a coin could provide a certain poignancy and clarification to a scene that, from a textual point of view, is inherently ambiguous.

Shiner, in addition to illuminating the likely style and manner of delivery, also examines 'how the performer would try to move and involve the audience in and through the recitation of the Gospel' (2003: 143). Ancient sources describing philosophical and religious gatherings frequently depict active audience participation, and Paul's correspondence to the Corinthians (e.g.,

1 Cor. 12.10; 14.16, 23-26) suggests the same, though of course Paul seeks to ensure that audience participation does not disrupt the gathering. Audiences were known to spontaneously react with applause, disapproval, questions, or in the case of religious gatherings, charismatic expressions of worship.

Though it is impossible to know for certain how a first-century audience would react to a given performance of Mark's Gospel, Shiner draws upon ancient rhetorical manuals to suggest the kinds of practices that might invoke audience participation, in particular, audience applause. Various rhetoriticians, such as Quintilian, Lucian, Cicero and Tacitus, suggest that audience applause would often result from the delivery of substantive material, the use of verbal flair that was pleasing to the intellect and ear, or the implementation of extravagant delivery techniques (Shiner 2003: 154-67). To illustrate from the Gospels, Shiner notes several examples from Mark, including the pithy, antithetical statement of Jesus in 2.17, the vocal effects in the prologue, as well as the natural applause likely to erupt through the narration of Jesus' dramatic healings. Though audience participation is a foreign concept to many in the contemporary world, there is every indication that the ancients not only anticipated but elicited audience response, deliberately 'blurring the boundary between the narrative and performance worlds' (Shiner 2003: 173).

In sum, Shiner's monograph is a 'breakthrough in seeking to construct ancient performance scenarios' (Rhoads 2006a: 120). It firmly locates the Gospels in their oral contexts and offers plausible performance scenarios based upon Greco-Roman sources and textual cues within the Gospels. Moreover, Shiner opens the door to new and fresh avenues of interpretation both for the Gospels and the rest of the NT.

## *Conclusion*

The interplay between orality and the Gospels is an exciting field with tremendous potential for advancing our understanding of Jesus and the early church. Over the last thirty years orality studies have made inroads into Gospels research. From Kelber's pioneering work to recent discussions of performance, a growing body of scholarship has sought to appreciate the oral context in which the Jesus tradition was performed and transmitted. There is still much work to be done, and important conversations remain, but there is every indication that the field has a bright future, particularly as it relates to other areas of inquiry such as social memory theory (Kirk and Thatcher 2005; Thatcher 2006; Kelber 2006; Barton, Stuckenbruck and Wold 2007; McKnight and Mournet 2009).

Despite the obvious progress, however, this review surfaces a perennial issue. While advancement has been slow and varied, the broader penetration of orality studies into the realm of Gospels research has been even slower. What is perhaps most striking is not that some continue to discount the media context in which the Jesus traditions took shape (Talbert 1978; Schmithals 1997; Hollander 2000)—some even insisting that 'Jesus and his disciples did not move within an oral society' (Gerhardsson 2005: 13). More shocking is that the majority of scholars continue to interpret the documents of the NT from a decidedly chirographic perspective, in spite of the general consensus that the Jesus traditions circulated in an oral milieu. Though there has been a persistent call to alter 'the default setting' (Dunn 2003a), to exchange a predominantly literary paradigm for one that recognizes that the traditions about Jesus were passed by word of mouth and that the Gospels were performed in an oral context, there has been significantly more acknowledgment than application of this insight. Quite simply, it appears that the 'disproportionately print-oriented hermeneutic' of which Kelber wrote still persists among the scholarly community (1983: xv). As Holly Hearon concludes, 'the challenge for scholars in the twenty-first century is to effect a shift in the study of biblical texts away from the heavy, indeed almost exclusive, emphasis on the literary nature of these texts to the study of the texts as sound maps intended to be heard in a rhetorical culture that emphasized the persuasive power of the spoken word' (Hearon 2006: 3). Until this vision is realized, our understanding of the Gospels and early Christianity will remain obscured by a perspective that is foreign to the social reality of Jesus and his followers.

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