

SOUNDING THE ESCHATOLOGICAL ALARM:  
CHAPTER THIRTEEN IN THE PERFORMANCE OF MARK

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It is possible to distinguish at least three different ways that books were used in the ancient world.<sup>1</sup> Each of these uses related to oral performance in a different manner. Some books are essentially performance pieces, which either record oral performances or are intended to be presented as oral performance more or less as written. This would include most written speeches, poetry, drama, and most narrative. I would include the Gospel of Mark in this group. A second group are intended as school books. In this case, the oral presentation of the book combines reading with exposition. Loveday Alexander has done a superb job of describing their

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<sup>1</sup>The observations in this paper on the composition and performance of Mark in general are largely based on the evidence presented in Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003); “Creating the Kingdom: The Performance of Mark as Revelatory Event” in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, Festschrift for Robert C. Tannehill (ed. S. H. Ringe and H. C. P. Kim; Harrisburg, Pa.: T & T Clark International, forthcoming, 2004); “Applause and Applause Lines in the Gospel of Mark,” in *Rhetorics and Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Wilhelm Wuellner* (ed. J. D. Hester; Harrisburg, Pa.: T & T Clark International, forthcoming).

use.<sup>2</sup> The instructor reads short sections from the text and then explains the meaning. The use of scripture in both synagogue and church is a variation on this model. Depending on the type of material, the students may have been expected to memorize sections. I would expect that books like the Wisdom of Ben Sira or the Gospel of Thomas would have been used this way. A third group are intended for private study. They provide the readers with material that they can use in their own oral performances. Books like Plutarch's *Sayings of Kings and Commanders* and *Sayings of Romans* appear to be of this type. Competent speakers in the ancient Mediterranean world were expected to have at their disposal a large stock of quotations from the poets and famous persons which they could insert into their performances at appropriate times. This is true not only for those making formal presentations, but among the better educated it was expected in more informal situations as well, such as discussions at symposia. These books may have served largely as compendiums of material that readers could memorize for use later in their own oral performances.

Books written for one purpose could for a different purpose, but not all books were suited for all three. Performance works routinely were used in school and for private study. Homer continued to be presented by rhapsodes in competitions, but grammarians presented Homer in the reading plus commentary style of the schools, and students memorized portions in school. In Plato's dialogue *Ion*, Ion discusses both his performance of Homer and his ability to answer questions about Homer, so apparently the same person might utilize the same text both

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<sup>2</sup>Loveday Alexander, "Paul and the Hellenistic Schools: The Evidence of Galen," in *Paul and His Hellenistic Context* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 60-83.

in the performance and the school commentary mode. On the other hand, school books or books for private study could not usually be successfully adapted for performance.

Conventional genre distinctions do not necessarily correspond to the way that books were used. For example, Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* seems well suited for a performance style reading, while Iamblichus' *On the Pythagorean Life*, the first book of his *Pythagorean Synagoge*, is badly organized for performance and was probably presented as reading plus commentary in his school. Collections of sayings might be used in school or for private study. The *Gospel of Thomas*, with its insistence on the importance of understanding the secret meaning of the sayings, seems to require explication by someone familiar with those meanings. The same is true of lists of Pythagorean symbols. Plutarch's *Sayings of Kings and Commanders*, on the other hand, while written in the same form, contains sayings that appear self explanatory. Thus it would not require expert commentary in order to be understood. For that reason I have put it in the category of books for private study.

I believe the same is true of the gospels. Mark is well suited for performance, which suggests that it was written with performance in mind. Luke shares the form of narrative gospel with Mark, but he appears to have used his sources much as did Iamblichus in his *On the Pythagorean Life*, shifting between primary sources in different sections. While Luke maintains the pretense of narrative more than does Iamblichus, like Iamblichus he seems more interested in including available material than in ease or effectiveness of performance. Thus Luke appears to me to have more of a school use in mind. This would accord with what he says in his preface as well, where he states that his purpose in writing is "that you may recognize the certainty of the

matters about which you were taught” (Lk 1.4).

### Composition

It seems to me most likely that the Gospel of Mark is an oral composition and was probably performed several times before it was written. The model for oral composition with which New Testament scholars are most familiar is the Parry-Lord model of epic composition, in which each performance is a new composition based on earlier performances and making use of stock scenes and formulas which are woven into an existing plot.<sup>3</sup> P. J. J. Botha has pointed out ways in which Mark’s method of composition is related to that model.<sup>4</sup> To some extent the rhetorical model of oral composition was similar. Ability to compose speeches extemporaneously was highly valued.<sup>5</sup> Rhetoricians could compose extemporaneously by drawing a store of organizational models and techniques, common place arguments and examples, and quotations from classical works.

Rhetoricians could also reproduce quite accurately speeches composed ahead of time.

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<sup>3</sup>Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (ed. A. Parry; New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>4</sup>P. J. J. Botha, “Mark’s Story as Oral Traditional Literature: Rethinking the Transmission of Some Traditions about Jesus,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 47 (1991): 304-31.

<sup>5</sup>Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 19.4; Lucian, *Rhet. praec.* 18; 20; *idem*, *Pseudol.* 5; Cicero, *De or.* 1.22.102-104; 3.50.194; Plato, *Hipp. min.* 363c-d; Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.7.21; Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 2.8.579. See also D. A. Russell, *Greek Declamation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 80-81.

Reading a speech was considered to be in bad form.<sup>6</sup> Quintilian suggests that speakers write out their speeches and then memorize them word for word. If one's memory is weak, however, he allows one to memorize only the general structure of the speech.<sup>7</sup> For both extemporaneous speaking and the reproduction of previously composed material, a good memory was essential, and as a result memory was one of the standard topics covered in the rhetorical handbooks. Since Mark exhibits a much more clear structure than the oral epics, I expect that it was more carefully planned than the compositions in the epic tradition. It was also, I expect, much more stable in performance.

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<sup>6</sup>Aristotle [*Rhet. Alex.*] 36, 1444a; Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.7.31-32; 11.3.132.

<sup>7</sup>Quintilian, *Inst.* 11.2.44-49.

A number of the rhetorical handbooks describe a system used for the memorization of speeches in which images representing either words or ideas are fit into a previously memorized architectural structure or a landscape.<sup>8</sup> This allows the speaker to keep a large amount of material in a fixed order. Since the handbooks assume that the system is familiar and since all Greek and Roman education involved a great deal of memorization, the system was probably learned in the early years of a child's schooling.<sup>9</sup> I have argued previously that the structure of Mark's gospel can be remembered by placing sections and episodes on a very simple symmetrical structure such as a temple front.<sup>10</sup> The composition of Mark would have taken place through a combination of plotting major sections, each designed to make a few principle points, onto the structure and then plotting the episodes in each section onto the same structure. Many of the episodes probably existed in the oral tradition. A significant number are probably created by Mark.

The structuring of the gospel to fit the memory system would make it relatively easy to

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<sup>8</sup>Cicero, *De or.* 2.86.351-2.88.360; *Rhet. Her.* 3.16-24; Quintilian *Inst.* 11.2.11-31. The system is fully explained in Frances Amelia Yates, *Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1-26. For a fuller discussion of the issue of memorization, see Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 103-25.

<sup>9</sup>Callimachus, *Epigr.* 49; Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.1.36, 1.3.1; H. I. Marrou, H. I. *Education in Antiquity* (tr. G. Lamb; New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1964), 215, 231, 365, 375; Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) 225; M. L. Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 22-23.

<sup>10</sup>Whitney Shiner, "Structuring for Performance: The Memorization Structure of the Gospel of Mark," unpublished paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, November, 2002.

memorize. The structure would have been memorized for performance. I doubt very much that it would have been memorized word for word. There are few places where the specific wording is very important, such as the verbal connections between the baptism and crucifixion scenes. The author probably kept in mind the connections he or she wanted to make. Such verbal connections were probably lost in the performances of others. I think that the flexible way that Matthew and Luke treat Markan episodes is very similar to the way performers of Mark would treat the episodes. The high value placed on improvisation in the rhetorical culture of the Greco-Roman world makes it highly probable that performers felt free to add or subtract material in order to fit their specific audience and the occasion of the performance.<sup>11</sup> The architectural memory system allows the performer to depart from the set outline of the narrative and to pick it up again after the addition or deletion of material.

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<sup>11</sup>Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 109-112.

The gospel probably developed over time through progressive elaborations of a passion narrative in repeated performances. Paul takes his audience to task as “foolish Galatians, before whose eye’s Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified” (Gal 3:1). Hans Dieter Betz has recognized that the public exhibition to which the passage refers was most likely a vivid narration of the passion. The goal of narrative according to the rhetorical handbooks is to make the audience feel present at the actual event. Good narrative is a dramatic reenactment.<sup>12</sup> The reminder of this portrayal serves as a link between baptismal language about being crucified with Christ and rhetorical questions that couple the reception the Spirit with hearing and faith. This line of argument suggests that Paul associated the passion narrative with baptism and the reception of the Spirit. He implies that the passion narrative should have had a profound impact on his audience and give them a proper understanding of the relationship between the cross of Christ and salvation.

The gospel of Mark could easily have developed as an elaboration of such a vivid passion narrative linked with baptism. In progressive stages, teaching on discipleship could have been added as baptismal instruction and the narrative could have been elaborated to include events leading up to the passion. Material indicating connections between John the Baptist, the disciples, and the passion of Jesus was added as further baptismal instruction. A prologue centering on the baptism of John, Jesus, and Christian believers was added to serve as a prooimium. Exorcism was part of early baptismal ceremonies, so exorcisms and other healings

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<sup>12</sup>Hans Dieter Betz, Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letters to the Churches in Galatia (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 131.



were added to relate the narrative to the baptismal setting. The architectural memory system would allow Mark to reorganize his material mentally into progressively more complicated versions. He could simply shift episodes into a different organizational structure every time that additional narrative material was added.

I see no reason to believe that the eschatological discourse ever existed as an independent entity. It is fundamentally important to the structure and meaning of the gospel. It is the longest speech in the gospel and the requirements of performance make it stand out from the surrounding narrative, as I will show below. In the absence of resurrection appearances, it contains Jesus' farewell instructions. The abrupt ending of the gospel forces the audience back to the eschatological discourse to understand the context of the crucifixion and resurrection. The discourse makes it clear that these events point beyond themselves to a time of unequivocal victory. While the life of Jesus is past time for Mark's audience, the future time described by Jesus is the audience's present, and thus the discourse speaks most directly to the audience's situation. The discourse's placement within the gospel mirrors the placement of the parable discourse. The two are complementary as hermeneutical keys to the gospel. The parable chapter tells us to look beyond surface appearances to find the spiritual truth. The eschatological discourse tells us to apply a similar hermeneutic to history. The apparent suffering of the present time is in fact a sign of the true meaning of history, God's rule and God's imminent vindication of the faithful.

### Performance

Now I would like to turn to some observations about the eschatological discourse within the performance of the gospel as a whole. These observations are based on my investigation of speaking styles in the Roman world and my own dramatic readings of the Gospel.

One very important thing to note is that the eschatological discourse requires the performer to shift performance style. Most of Mark's gospel is fast paced episodic narrative. The performer has actions to present. The performer shifts rapidly between the emotions of various characters. The performance Jesus may often include the performance audience in his pronouncements. For the most part, however, the audience is watching interactions between the characters impersonated by the performer. Even in the parable discourse, the performer is primarily presenting narrative. The parable of the sower is narrative material, though presenting a parable is a bit different from presenting gospel narrative. The discourse is broken up with an intense interaction between Jesus and his followers. The disconnected parables at the end of the discourse serve as examples of parabolic teaching. The gospel stresses the fact that their meaning is not readily apparent. The performer does not have to link them together into a sustained argument.

The eschatological discourse is a speech. It is simply impossible to maintain any semblance of narrative during the eschatological discourse. It is too long. There is little or nothing in it that provides narrative interest. One has to make the teaching compelling in itself or the audience will lose interest. One has to treat the audience as the audience of the speech rather than the audience of the narrative. Within the first few lines of the discourse one shifts from a narrative mode of discourse to a more rhetorical or teaching mode. The performer is still speaking

as Jesus within the narrative, so one becomes Jesus addressing the audience. The discourse is a rhetorical piece set within the narrative, a bit like Apollonius' defense speech in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* but on a smaller scale.<sup>13</sup> First century audiences would have been used to shifts between narrative and oratorical modes of speech. The rhetorical handbooks tell their readers to deliver narrative in speeches as dramatic narrative, so such shifts must have been commonplace.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.*, 8.7.

<sup>14</sup>Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.2.

Because dialogue in the oral performance of narrative is always addressed by the performer to the audience, there is a tendency for individuals in the audience to experience words of Jesus within the gospel as directly addressed to themselves. This is an effect that I have called audience inclusive dialogue.<sup>15</sup> *To you has been given the mystery of the Kingdom of God.* The required shift in performance modes makes the effect even more pronounced in the eschatological discourse.

In Athenian old comedy, there was a point in the play, called the parabasis, when the chorus stepped out of role and addressed the audience directly.<sup>16</sup> The chorus might ridicule members of the audience, attack a rival playwright, discourse on current politics, or appeal for the judges of the competition to award the prize to their play. While it is unlikely that the parabasis of old comedy provided a direct model for the eschatological discourse, the effect may have been rather similar. In oral performance, the content is flexible. The author/performer could use Jesus' farewell discourse to address the audience on any issue that seemed pertinent. Even within an eschatological framework, a great variety of audience specific issues could be addressed. For this reason the discourse is likely to have been one of the most flexible sections of the

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<sup>15</sup>Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 171-90.

<sup>16</sup>J. Michael Walton, *Greek Theater Practice* (Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies 3; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1980), 31, 72; George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), 20-23; Thomas K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy: Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis* (Cornell Studies in Classical Philology 51; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Gregory Michael Sifakis, *Parabasis and Animal Choruses: A Contribution to the History of Attic Comedy* (London, Athlone Press, 1971).

gospel. I expect that the eschatological orientation and the threatening tone were constant, but the performer could tailor the specific content to fit the situation facing the audience of each performance.

Personally, I much prefer the performance of narrative to the speech material. I have never tried performing Matthew because of his penchant for interrupting the narrative with long discourses. In fact, I am not certain that Matthew is a performance piece rather than a school book. If Matthew was presented as a performance piece, however, I expect the shift between narrative and oratorical modes is a major part of the performance effect. The formulaic “And after Jesus had finished saying these things, he...” helps the performer make the shift at the end of each discourse.

The discourse as direct address to the audience is reinforced by the great density of audience involving cues. In performance, second person forms are always heard as addressed to oneself in the audience, at least to some extent. In the thirty-three verses of the discourse, there are seventeen second person imperatives, five third person imperatives, thirteen second person plural pronouns, nine second person verbs, and one second person reflexive pronoun. There are only fifteen verses without either a second person form or a third person imperative. Apart from verses 24-27, there is no section longer than two verses without a second person or an imperative, and only two of those sections are two verses long. That accounts for seven single verses, two double verses, and one section of four verses. In addition to that many of the third person references could refer to the addressees. Mark often uses third person imperatives with a subject or a clause defining the subject in a way that is similar to a vocative with a second person

imperative. If you fit this category, then do this. The discourse forms a pattern of rapid alteration between highly involving second person or imperative forms with third person explanatory verses. The third person verses exist to give context to the second person verses.

My interpretation of the eschatological discourse is based on the observation made in my investigation of first century oral performance style that primary attention was given in both composition and performance to the emotional impact of a work.<sup>17</sup> To understand the eschatological discourse we need to see how it fits within the emotional development of the gospel as a whole. One might think of the gospel as a score through which the performer plays on the emotions of the audience to achieve his or her desired effect. It is clear that many passages in the gospel might be performed with a variety of emotional inflections, and not every interpreter would develop the emotional score in the same way. Thus we are no more likely to gain unanimity through this method of interpretation than through any other. But just as with most approaches to interpretation, there are interpretations that are more true to the gospel than others.

My investigation of first century performance style discovered a tendency toward extremism of emotional tone. Performers are often described as shouting. It was expected that they would expend every ounce of energy in a performance, and they are often described as streaming with sweat and their clothes disheveled by the end of a performance.<sup>18</sup> Reading was

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<sup>17</sup>Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 57-88.

<sup>18</sup>Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 77-88.

done in the same manner. Clement of Alexandria includes reading in a list of physical exercises that are appropriate for a gentleman or lady.<sup>19</sup> Thus I think it is appropriate to push the emotional tone as much as possible, and I tend to determine the emotions for a passage by finding the most intense tone that the passage will sustain.

When examined from this perspective, it is immediately apparent that there is a great density of violent or alarmist language in the discourse. Watch. Lead you astray. Wars. Reports of wars. Alarmed. Rise against. Against. Earthquakes. Famines. Labor pains. Watch. Hand you over. Beaten. Stand before. Bring you to trial. Hand you over. Worry. Brother will betray brother. Father his child. Children will rise against parent. Have them put to death. Hated. Endures. Desolating sacrilege. Ought not to be. Flee. Must not go down. Must not turn back. Woe. Suffering. Be alert. Suffering. Sun will be darkened. Moon will not give light. Stars will be falling. Powers will be shaken. Look. Be awake. Do not know. Watch. Do not know. Watch. If we take that list as instances of violent or alarmist language, we have forty-two instances in thirty-three verses.

How does this fit into the gospel as a whole? The Jerusalem section of the gospel is filled with almost constant conflict. In chapters eleven and twelve, however, the conflict has a

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<sup>19</sup>Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.10.50-51 (*ANF*); citation from William G. Rutherford, *A Chapter in the History of Annotation* (Scholia Aristophanica, vol. 3; New York: Macmillan, 1905), 111, n. 15.

triumphalistic tone. Jesus takes control of the temple. Jesus defeats all his opponents in debate.

The conflict in these chapters is necessary for the development of the plot, to provide motivation for the officials' attack on Jesus. As part of the emotional score, these chapters inoculate the listeners against taking the death of Jesus as a defeat. There is a great deal for which the audience can cheer. Mark also orchestrates the section to build contempt for Jesus' opponents, who are shown to be impotent and of vile character.

In the passion narrative itself, Mark does a number of things to undermine this sense of triumphalism. I have argued that the purpose of the Gospel of Mark is to facilitate in the audience an emotional and visceral appropriation of the death of Jesus and the meaning of that death as it was experienced by Mark.<sup>20</sup> The gospel places the audience in a liminal state in which they pass through death to a new state of being.<sup>21</sup> The eschatological alarm has an indispensable role in the creation of that state.

(1) The eschatological alarm places the coming passion narrative squarely in the context of the impending death and suffering of the listeners themselves so that the death of Jesus and their own death become emotionally merged.

(2) The alarm begins an emotional barrage creating shock and awe in the listener through

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<sup>20</sup>I have argued this point in "Creating the Kingdom."

<sup>21</sup>For liminality in ritual processes, see Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*, *Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society* (1964), reprinted in idem, ed., *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111; *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).



which the death of Jesus and the listener's own death become emotionally present. Elements of that barrage include the unrelenting urgency of the address, the frequent invocation of danger, and the frequent urgent imperatives. These are typical strategies for the production of liminality.

(3) The alarm enacts apocalyptic epistemology in which apparent meanings and causes are replaced with the revelation of hidden meanings and causes. In chapters eleven and twelve the gospel enacts conflict between Jesus and the authorities that provides a worldly rationale for the death of Jesus. The eschatological alarm creates a new context for experiencing the death of Jesus, cosmic displacement and the will of God.

(4) The alarm enacts the privileged status of the listeners as recipients of secret knowledge of unparalleled importance. This is another strategy associated with the production of liminal states.