

The Strange Sound of the Bible: Hearing It Again for the First Time  
A Lecture Given at Trinity Western University - October 5, 2004  
Dennis Dewey, Biblical Storyteller

The outline for my discussion tonight is generated as a commentary around several quotations from an essay by the late Don Juel entitled "The Strange Silence of the Bible," a winking reference to the classic book, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*.

I remember the first time I saw the Gospel of Mark "performed" in public. I had regularly begun my lectures on the synoptic Gospels by pointing to the episodic nature of the prose, which many have taken to be the mark of oral sources. Looking at the printed page, it was not difficult to make the case that the narratives were in major ways deficient.... The person who "performed" Mark, however, recited in such a way that the breaks in the story were not a problem. The sense of coherence was established in several ways, like changing positions and looking at different sections of the audience. It worked. The audience had little sense that the Gospel was deficient as a narrative. There were gaps and jumps, but the way they were handled by the performer made them enticing rather than irritating and distracting.<sup>1</sup>

So let's have a go. Let's hear the first chapter of Mark's Gospel.

Reactions?

Again we listen to Juel:

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<sup>1</sup>Don Juel, "The Strange Silence of the Bible" in *Interpretation*, January 1997, p.7.

...[A]s a professional interpreter of the New Testament, I am increasingly struck that much biblical interpretation occurs without the Bible ever having been read. I am not referring to the tendency among many of us to bury the text beneath layers of historical data and methodological considerations, though that is a serious problem. I mean exegesis is carried on without ever reading aloud, especially in a public setting where one reads and others listen. Actual engagement with the biblical text is an essentially private encounter, done best in a library or study. Commentaries are consulted and papers written without ever voicing words that were written to be heard. It is not only that pastors are given little training in public reading. The whole interpretive enterprise suggests that public reading is unimportant to understanding the scripture.... The Bible is strangely silent among its most devoted students.<sup>2</sup>

When I do workshops, I note that the first three steps of the process of learning the story by heart are 1) read it aloud, 2) read it aloud and 2) read it aloud. Yet there seems to be a real discomfort about doing so. Everything in our educational system has told us that reading aloud is inappropriate, that we are to read silently and without even so much as moving our lips!

Yet in antiquity all reading was done aloud.

Augustine on Ambrose: That he read silently was an odd behavior that required explanation.

## STORY

Listening to a CD recording of some Chopin Nocturnes at the house of a friend who is a fairly accomplished pianist. Reminded of something in one of the Chopin Preludes. “Do have the Preludes?” He went to the piano and brought back a *book* of the Chopin Preludes.

Musical score - text?

MY DREAM in seminary - discovering the Dead Sea Tapes.

This morning I told stories from the Gospel of John in the chapel service. Afterward I was asked about my understanding of narrative in preaching. I responded by with the old saw, “If the scripture is well read, the sermon is half preached.” But I take that one step further to say, “If the scripture is well told, the sermon need only be an ‘Amen.’” The African-American Church has known this for generations. Richard Lischer, writing in the *Anglican Theological Review* asks:

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<sup>2</sup>Juel, p.6.

And what is the dilemma of interpretation? It is not the question of 'what the text meant'; we have shelves of commentaries to tell us [that]... The problem is the 'movement' from past to present and the use of ancient materials for contemporary purposes. The notion of 'performance' as a metaphor for the interpretive move from exegesis to proclamation recommends itself to all preachers as one possible means of resolving the hermeneutical dilemma.<sup>3</sup>

We need to stop thinking of the text as exclusively being ink on paper and begin to think of it as performance. When we hear the word “text,” we commonly think of ink on paper. But, as Walter Ong observes, the etymology of the word “text” is much closer to its oral roots. It is related to the words “textile” and “texture”—words that immediately spring to mind when we remember that we “spin a tale” and “weave a story,” and that in colloquial English the story is sometimes called a “yarn.”

It would seem, then, that a new way of relating to the scriptures as “scripts” for performance, as musical notation for “playing” the stories might be appropriate. We need a new discipline in biblical studies, David Rhoads argues in a yet-unpublished essay. He writes:

In spite of the explosion of new methodologies in biblical studies in recent decades, we are only now beginning to assess the experience of performance in the analysis of the writings of the New Testament. This seems to be a rather large lacuna in New Testament studies. Consider the following. A performance was an integral part of every early Christian experience of the writings now in the New Testament. Always these writings were composed for oral performance. Always these writings were presented orally. Always there was a performer. Always they were heard rather than read. Always there was a communal audience. Always there was a physical location that shaped the performance and the reception. Often, I presume, no written text was even present to the event. Why have we not given greater attention to this dimension of the ancient world and this ancient experience of biblical writings? The group in the SBL called, “The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media has a lone voice in the wilderness for some time, but now there is beginning to be a wider interest in the performance of New Testament writings.

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<sup>3</sup>Richard Lischer, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: ‘Performing’ the Scriptures” in *Anglican Theological Review* (Evanston: Seabury Western Theological Seminary, Vol. LXXXVII, No. 2, Spring 1995), 161.

When you think of the New Testament writings as performance texts, you wonder why New Testament scholars do not function more like musicologists or dramatists. The interpretation of music and drama is done primarily by performers and critics of performances. Can you imagine a musicologist who does nothing but sit in libraries and study the score of a composition without ever having heard a performance of it? Would it not seem strange for interpreters of drama, including ancient Greek drama, to analyze a play without ever having seen various interpretations of it performed [in English]? Similarly, does it not seem strange that biblical critics interpret writings that were written to be performed—as gospels or letters or apocalypses—without ever having heard them performed or without giving some attention to the nature of the performance of these works in ancient and/or modern times.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>David Rhoads, “Performance Criticism A New Methodolgy in Biblical Studies?” (unpublished draft), p.1.

Time for another installment of Mark. This time in response to Juel's observation, "I also noted [when I heard the Gospel of Mark performed] there were times during the performance when people laughed. I did not recall ever laughing to myself when reading through Mark."<sup>5</sup>

MARK: the feeding of the 5000  
the Feeding of the 4000  
the encounter with the Pharisees  
the discussion with the disciples about bread

Northrup Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1937) arranged all literature according the schema of a compass, observing that any work has a certain range of world view range into which it falls. If one stands at the midpoint of a compass, one cannot take in more than 180 degrees with peripheral vision. In fact clear vision is possible only within about a 90-degree slice of the compass. This wedge, then, encompasses the literature's range. The four points of the compass Frye identified with "comedic," "romantic," "tragic," and "ironic."

COMEDIC (EAST) is concerned with the development of HARMONY.  
Complications in life seen to be illusory when the true nature of reality is discerned.  
Movement is from a supposed subordination to power to a union with it.  
Resolution is in clearing up mistaken identities, restoring the balance, solving the problem.

ROMANTIC (SOUTH) is concerned with the QUEST.  
Life's complications seen as the real consequences of embarking on an adventure often in which a protagonist often pitted against an antagonist.  
Movement in the narrative is often around a struggle—  
or a journey from the ordinary to the extraordinary—which produces a priceless reward.  
Resolution is in triumph, victory, success.

TRAGIC (WEST) is concerned with inevitable DECLINE.  
An heroic figure falls.  
Movement is from a union with power to subordination (and often death) beneath power.  
Resolution is in the hero's acceptance of diminution of personal autonomy (resignation).

IRONIC (NORTH) is concerned with the existential and EMPIRICAL.  
Life has no heroes, just ordinary humans, who are a mixed bag of good and bad.  
Movement is from strange uncertainties toward natural explanations  
or to acceptance of the inability to explain.  
Resolution is found in what can be known empirically, in acceptance and in human solidarity.

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<sup>5</sup>Juel, p. 8.

James Hopewell at Perkins School of Theology applied Frye's ideas<sup>6</sup> to the faith perspective world view of congregations in the early 1980s. He observed that congregations typically share a faith perspective with most of their members falling within a 90-degree portion of the compass field. He called these "gnostic," "charismatic," "canonic" and "empiric."

GNOSTIC (corresponds to COMIC/EAST) entails involvement in a DRAMA which intuits varying degrees of a hidden unfolding of meaning in the cosmos. Salvation requires joining with that reality, that force, that cosmic direction. Its spirituality emphasizes absorption, union, mystery, special knowledge, meditation, and healing, sometimes making use of consciously symbolic gestures and rituals

"It all adds up."  
"It will all work out."  
"Let go and let God."  
"Possibility thinking"

Spirit CHARISMATIC (ROMANTIC/SOUTH) entails an encounter with the supernatural that TRANSFORMS seekers but does not absorb them.

God is seen as transcendent, but as descending to meet those who undertake the quest in which adventure and struggle are idealized.

"Expect a miracle."  
"I want Jesus to be my Savior."  
"God told me that...."  
"We met Christ...."  
"I feel the presence of God."

CANONIC (TRAGIC/WEST) entails a stress on OBEDIENCE to the will of God, a confrontation by the "otherness" of God, who is not a partner in adventure, but one to whom submission is the appropriate response. This approach tends to place heavy emphasis on study of God's Word, sometimes on the acceptance of illness and catastrophe as God's will at times, and on the reality of sin and evil and a perception of general moral decline.

"Get right with God."  
"Bible-centered, Bible-believing."

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<sup>6</sup>Carroll, Jackson W. et al, editors, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, Abingdon Press, 1986

"It is the will of God that...."

EMPIRIC (IRONIC/NORTH) entails a stress on the integrity of HUMAN EXPERIENCE in which supernatural explanations of events are suspect.

This approach values a healthy skepticism and reacts particularly strongly to the Charismatic/Romantic view.

Blessing is "horizontal," not "vertical."

Emphasis is placed on this world, on common sense, on the celebration of our common humanity in community.

"I don't think of myself as 'holier than thou!'"

"Let's be honest."

"How is that relevant to everyday life?"

"Fulfillment of human potential..."

"That's the way it goes sometimes."

"All I can do is 'be there'."

I have done some reflection on the Frye-Hopewell hypothesis in terms of the temperament types identified by the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator. Myers-Briggs observes that there are four human temperaments: NT, NF, SJ and SP (for "Intuitive Thinking," "Intuitive Feeling," "Sensor Judging" and "Sensor Perceiving." The corresponding watchwords for them most important values associated with these temperaments are (in corresponding order): "competence," "integrity," "duty" and "experience." We might associate the NTs (those who value competence) with the COMIC/GNOSTIC/EASTERNERS. The SOUTHERN/ROMANTIC/CHARISMATICS with the SP "experiencers." The SJ duty types with the WESTERN/TRAGIC/CANONIC. And for the straight-up, no-nonsense NORTHERNERS, the NF's integrity. We are ranging far afield here. One could argue a completely different arrangement of the types. But let's leave that aside a moment and look at how we might overlay the four gospels.

If each of the four—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—gravitates to one or another of these poles of the compass, to which would each tend? What "story world view" does each exhibit. In particular, as Mark is the topic of the evening, where does Mark belong?

TWO STORIES : the calming of the sea  
the empty tomb

Mark's rough and tumble gospel, it seems to me, is straight-up North. The opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. It is not too far a stretch, I think, to imagine that Mark's story is told as invitation to the community to be the storytelling community—not to shrink from the task in fear, but to support one another in a faith that has only an empty tomb, no Jesus appearing. It is a story for people who doubt, people who are afraid, people who ask (like the disciples), "Who *is* this?!" And story in turn that asks (as Jesus does of Peter), "Who do *you* say that I am?" The answer to that will lie in the stories that are told and the stories that are lived.

Once more to professor Juel, who notes that storytelling is always dangerous business, but especially so in storytelling the gospel:

It has occurred to me more than once that [this and other]... features of the performance were due to the performer as much as the text. I have been impressed in subsequent performances, for example, by the ease with which the “reader” can play the disciples as buffoons or as sympathetic characters. The debates among commentators about the role of the disciples take on flesh and blood in a performance, and the results are unnerving. I can understand the anxiety that such insight awakens. It explains why, for example, my liturgics professor would urge us to read the Bible without inflection, lest we interpret it for someone. The reader has considerable power, including, as it turns out, the power to make the Bible so uninteresting the people do not bother to read it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Juel, p.8.