

Biblical Storytelling and Biblical Scholarship

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This paper is a further development of a paper written for a session of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Group at SBL in 2002. It was the response to this paper that generated the idea of having this conference. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the major differences that biblical storytelling has made in my understanding of the meaning and function of the four Gospels in their original historical context. While there are implications for all biblical stories, I will focus attention here on the canonical Gospels.

The need to establish storytelling as a methodology for the study of biblical narrative was made clear in a conversation several years ago with Bob Tannehill. In response to my argument about the importance of storytelling, he said, "Why does storytelling make any difference? Whether I tell it or read it, it's all the same narrative." This is a response to Bob's question.

Storytelling is a relatively new methodology for the study and interpretation of biblical narrative. Storytelling is now an integral part of the teaching methods of some narrative critics and is widely used as a method for the recital of Scripture in public worship and in Christian education. But the source of the idea of biblical storytelling is the historical study of the original character of biblical narrative as stories that were told by storytellers to audiences in the ancient world. The purpose of this paper is to summarize some of the major results of this research and its implications for the future. I will try to give specific examples but I will not try to present the evidence for these conclusions or to deal with alternative interpretations of the data. The documentation and detailed argumentation with alternative interpretations of particular texts remains to be done. But there is a sense in which the legitimacy of a storytelling methodology has to be established first. Unless there is a way of mutually evaluating oral evidence, there is no possibility for detailed comparison of common data.

The importance of storytelling as a research methodology for the study of biblical narrative is grounded in 20th century study of communication technology and its interaction with cultural formation. The discipline of communications studies has established that the medium of a communication event shapes and even determines the meaning of communication events. The communication system—oral, manuscript, print, document, or digital—determines the mechanisms of perception in the brain, the processes of composition, the social systems of production and distribution, and the nature of reception by the receivers. Each medium or communication system has different characteristics and distinctive types of meaning. There are interactions between different communication systems but those interactions are extremely complex. The Gospels were produced in a communication culture in which there was constant interaction between the ancient oral communication system and an early literate technology and culture.

In light of this fact, the logic for storytelling as a foundational methodology for the study of biblical narrative is simple. The theory is this: if our goal is to identify the original meaning and character of biblical narratives in their original historical context, it is necessary to study those narratives in their original medium. If the medium determines the meaning, the story must be experienced in its original medium in order to experience its meaning. Changing the medium will change the meaning. In the case of biblical narratives, if the original medium was oral storytelling or recitation to audiences from memory sometimes with but often without a document, we must tell and listen to the stories told from memory to audiences in order to experience their original meaning. A systematic decision to study them in some other medium such as reading them alone in silence as documents will change our perception of the original meaning of the stories and of virtually every dimension of their character. The theory is then that the customary scholarly practice of the silent reading of ancient narratives as a foundational methodology has caused misperception and misinterpretation. This practice could be called media anachronism. It is to read back into the ancient world the documentary communication system of the 18th-20th centuries.

I have been studying biblical stories using a storytelling methodology for 35 years. I have memorized and recited significant parts of the gospels in Greek and told the Gospel of Mark and major parts of the other gospels as well as major narratives from the Old Testament in a variety of contexts. I have also developed ways of enabling people now to learn basic methods for learning and telling biblical stories. As an outgrowth of this work, a network of biblical storytellers was formed, now a small but significant international community. Biblical storytellers have been telling biblical stories to audiences for 25 years. Several persons are now doing biblical storytelling as either a full-time or part-time professional vocation. I have been recording the data from this storytelling research in various forms throughout these years.

For the purpose of this paper, I want to summarize some of the major areas of difference that emerge when the stories of the Gospels are studied with a storytelling rather than a documentary methodology. I will give concrete examples but I will make no effort to compare results in detail. My major purpose is to outline the areas of difference that emerge. However, in light of the radical nature of the differences, I will argue that we need to make biblical storytelling a foundational methodology for biblical scholarship.

Sound as the media world of biblical story

Biblical storytelling has confirmed that the original media world of biblical narratives was sound. When this research began, it was an open question whether the stories were effective if they were told. And many, including the early form critics such as Bultmann, argued that the stories were only told as short stories of no more than three minutes. Biblical storytelling has made it clear that the stories are highly engaging when they are told and that an evening of biblical storytelling of two to four hours is fully feasible, even with modern audiences unaccustomed to long stories. Subsequent research on the performance world of ancient literature has confirmed this. Evenings of storytelling and long readings from documents for entertainment and in worship were frequent in the ancient world.

The authors of the stories assumed that those who read the narratives would either tell them or read them out loud. The composition of the narratives consisted of the stories being composed as sound and then recorded in the only technology for recording sounds in the ancient world, namely, writing. The writing was often done by a scribe, as is reflected in Paul's description of his composition process. Telling the stories has made it clear that the stories of the Gospels were composed as sounds, as a composer composes music. The stories were not composed by the eye but by the ear. They were composed to be heard, rather than to be seen.

The function of repetition in biblical stories

Memorizing and telling biblical stories sets the repetition of words in a radically different context than reading them in silence. The repetition of words in oral narrative is a basic technique of composition, memorization and performance. Repetitions create verbal threads that tie the story together. This is equally true of music that also involves the composition of sounds.

In the composition of sound whether musical or literary, the repetition of sounds is a fundamental technique of composition and of memorization. Repetitions enable both performers and audiences to remember the story and to make connections between disparate parts of the story. Repetitions are only a problem that needs to be explained by the hypothesis of multiple documents for persons who do not perceive their functional significance. Critical analysts of the Pentateuch and the Gospels have often read repetitions as a sign of the merging of two documents, the phenomenon of "doublets." When the stories are not memorized and recited as a part of the method of biblical scholarship, the function of repetitions is misperceived. They are only a problem in documents that are being evaluated stylistically by the norms of written narratives.

The audience of biblical narratives

Biblical scholarship has generally assumed that the audience of biblical narratives received the stories by reading the texts in silence. The "reader" is assumed to be the receiver of the stories in most historical critical studies of biblical narrative.

Recent research has clarified the historical probabilities. The primary mode of audience reception of biblical stories was in public tellings or readings. By the first century, a small percentage, 5%-10%, of persons in the ancient world knew how to read and virtually no one read in silence. The predominant reception of biblical story was by groups of persons who listened to the stories as they were recited. To be specific, the reception of biblical stories is reflected in the stories of the reading of the Torah at the Watergate in Nehemiah 8 and in the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4. It is also worth noting that there are, to my knowledge, no documented instances of silent, private reading of manuscripts in the Bible itself. Thus, in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, Phillip hears him reading aloud before asking him if he understands what he is reading (Acts 8.30).

A second assumption has been that the audience of the Gospels was composed of persons from a particular subgroup. Thus, conventional wisdom is that Mark was written for Roman Gentile Christians, Matthew for Jewish Christians, Luke for heterogeneous Hellenistic Gentile Christians, and John for a sectarian group of former Jews and Gentiles in dialogue with the synagogue. When the stories are told, however, it becomes clear that the audiences of the Gospels were diverse and that the narrators are responding to a range of persons in their audiences. Telling the stories makes one aware that the evangelists are seeking to include a range of people in their audiences.

In Mark, for example, there are many comments and allusions that are directed to Jews. The Gerasene demons named "Legion" and ending up in the pigs, the regular inclusion of Pharisaic and scribal questions regarding purity law and Sabbath law in the conflict stories, the feedings of five and four thousand in the wilderness like Moses, John's characterization as one like Elijah, Jesus' characterization as one like Elijah and Elisha in befriending unclean

and alien women and bringing dead children back to life, and the various sayings about the Messiah—these are all concrete instances of allusions that were directed to Jews. But Mark also answers the questions of Gentiles and Greek speaking Jews in his audience. Examples of this are his explanations of Jewish washing customs in Mark 7 and the translation into Greek of Hebrew and Aramaic words and sayings. Furthermore, Mark makes efforts to include the women in his audience by telling several stories about women (Simon Peter's mother in law; Jesus' mother; the woman who touched his garment; Jairus' daughter; the mothers who brought their children; the woman who anointed him in Bethany) with sympathy and compassion. In several of these stories, Jesus defends the woman from criticism by men (the woman who touched his garment; the mothers; the woman in Bethany).

Thus, the audiences of the evangelists were diverse. In all of the Gospels, the evidence from storytelling indicates that the audiences of the Gospels included those who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah as well as those who believed he was. Their audiences included Jews from various backgrounds, both those whose home was in Palestine and those whose home was in one of the Hellenistic cities of the Diaspora. In Mark, Luke and John and perhaps in Matthew, Gentiles as well as Jews are included in the audience. This evidence has often been misinterpreted because of the assumption that the audience was a reader. When Mark, for example, explains Jewish customs, the conclusion has been that Mark was writing for Gentiles. When the Gospel is told, it is clear that Mark is simply including Gentiles in his audience. To state the issue methodologically, an audience response rather than a reader response criticism is needed in order to understand the Gospels in their original setting. An audience can include members of many different groups.

The characterization of the audience

A further dimension of audience response is that the audience is frequently addressed directly as a character in the story. Furthermore, the audience's character can change in its identity. As the narrator tells the story, the audience is addressed at many

points as the listeners. Of course, the entire story is being told to the listeners. But most of the time the storyteller is describing events and painting a picture as if one a stage. But sometimes he addresses the audience directly. This happens most explicitly in the narrative comments when the storyteller stops the narration of the action and explains something to the audience. In the telling of the story, the audience is also addressed by characters in the story as their interlocutors. Thus, in the Gospels the audience is addressed by the narrator when s/he is telling Jesus' words as the crowd, the disciples, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Jews who believed in him, the Jews who wanted to kill him, etc. That is, in the telling of the story, the audience in a sense becomes these characters, particularly when there is a long speech. In the course of a long speech, the storyteller becomes that character and the audience becomes the character to whom s/he is speaking.

This phenomenon of audience characterization is developed systematically in the Gospel of John. A distinctive feature of John's Gospel is a series of long speeches in which the action stops and the storyteller as Jesus steps forward and talks to the audience directly. As you listen to these speeches, there is change in the character of the audience to whom Jesus is speaking. In the speeches of chapter 1-5 Jesus and John the Baptist address the audience as Jews (1.1-18;3.11-21; John the Baptist 3.27-36), In chapters 5-12 the storyteller as Jesus addresses the audience as Jews who believe and do not believe in him, as Jews who want to kill him and who want to follow him. That is, in this section, the audience is addressed as Jews who are torn between acceptance and rejection of Jesus. In 13-17, Jesus addresses the audience as his disciples in a highly intimate and personal speech. Thus, through the Gospel, there is a clear progression in the identity of the audience. The audience is invited to move from being Jews who are interested in Jesus (like Simon, Andrew, Nathanael, and Nicodemus), to being Jews who are torn between believing and not believing, to being disciples.

This only becomes clear when the stories are told and heard as stories. But we can describe the development of audience address in the course of the Gospels. This data is a clear indication of the identity of the audiences of the Gospels in their original historical context. In the Gospel of John, the audience was addressed and,

therefore, probably was Jews who were intensely conflicted about becoming followers of Jesus and members of the Christian community. In their context, believing in Jesus meant that they, like the blind man, would no longer be regarded as Jews by the majority of other Jews.

The function of characterization

A further problem in Gospel interpretation is the function of characterization. Even in narrative studies such as Alan Culpepper's study of John, the function of characterization is often seen as the representation of ideas or theological positions: i.e. the Jews represent disbelief. And in Gospel study as a whole, the general assumption is that the characters represent theological positions: i.e., Ray Brown's virtually allegorical description of the characters in John. In Markan interpretation, it has become widely accepted that Mark is in some way mocking or criticizing the disciples as characters who represent a Christology to which Mark is opposed. These studies treat the function of characterization as the allegorical representation of ideas or theologies. The purpose of the characterization is to invite the listeners to reflect on the ideas represented by the characters.

When the stories are told, this style of characterization doesn't correspond with the characterizations of the Gospels. The style of characterization is the presentation of real, often flawed human beings with whom the audience is invited to identify. The stories are not theological allegories but stories about real people who come to life in the telling of the story. For example, Peter is presented as a delightful character, not a theological opponent. He may be a slow student but he is one with whom everyone in the audience can sympathize.

The underlying reason for this difference in the assessment of the characters is the dynamics of aesthetic distance. When the stories are told, the storyteller has to present the characters and decide what attitude s/he will have toward the characters. This creates dynamics of distance in the storyteller's relationship to the characters that can range from complete sympathy to total

alienation. This in turn shapes the dynamics of the audience's relationship to the characters. When the stories are read in silence, the reader inevitably has a greater degree of aesthetic distance from the story and the characters. No matter how sympathetically or imaginatively a reader enters into the narrative, the dynamics of relationship to the characters of biblical narratives are different than when the story is heard in a performance.

Furthermore, storytellers have a different set of techniques for the control of aesthetic distance than a literary author. Facial expressions, gestures, and verbal attitudes or tone are some of the ways in which storytellers in performance can shape aesthetic distance in relation to the characters of their stories. In later developments of narrative technique in the novel, authors have learned how to influence and shape the dynamics of distance in characterization by complex literary techniques: extensive inside views, multiple narrators, first person narrators, narrative commentary. Henry Fielding was the first novelist who made major use of these literary techniques in writing for an audience of silent readers. But biblical storytellers wrote their stories for performance. As a result, the stories are very terse and are written with the assumption that the performers of the narratives will create the characters dynamically in performance. In this sense, biblical narratives are more like dramas, TV scripts, or operas than contemporary novels.

Thus, biblical storytelling sheds new light on the techniques of characterization in biblical narrative. The possibility emerges that biblical scholarship has misinterpreted the function of many of the characterizations because of the tendency to read the characters as allegorical representatives of ideas. This problem has been most pronounced and most destructive in the interpretation of characters that do bad things: e.g., the woman and the Jews. The function of these characterizations has been misinterpreted in a similar and extremely damaging way.

The rhetoric of biblical narratives

Biblical storytelling reveals the possibility that the rhetoric of the gospels has been wrongly understood. Because of the tendency of silent reading to generate reflection rather than identification, distance rather than sympathy, Gospel interpretation has tended to see the conflicts of the Gospels as polemics against all of the characters who do something wrong. Specifically, many scholars have seen Mark as carrying out a polemic against the disciples and Peter and all of the Gospels as a polemic against the Jews. In rhetorical terms, they see the narrative data as signs of rhetoric of opposition or alienation in which the purpose of the gospel is to alienate the audience from the characters who represent these positions.

When the stories are told, another possibility emerges. In many of the stories, the storyteller first invites the audience to identify with the characters who later do things that are in the narrative's norms radically wrong. The impact of the story for those members of the audience who do identify with these characters is not to be alienated from them but rather to be sympathetically involved with them and psychologically implicated in their actions. That is, they can understand and sympathize with why these characters did these wrong things such as denying Jesus or demanding his crucifixion. This rhetorical structure is present throughout the entire corpus of biblical narrative from the man and the woman in the garden to David on the palace roof to Peter in the courtyard of the high priest to the crowd/Jews at the Pilate trial. And with the possible exception of David, these narratives have often been read as using a rhetoric of condemnation. That is, the rhetorical purpose has been read as blame and condemnation. Thus, in this reading the purpose of the garden story is to invite the audience to condemn the woman as the source of sin.

The results of a storytelling methodology do not support these conclusions. Many of the stories have a rhetoric of implication in which the audience is invited to identify with characters who do radically wrong things and are then invited to reflect on this response. It is a radically different story dynamic. In the story of the garden, for example, the purpose is to invite the audience to

identify with both the woman and the man in their beautiful nakedness and then to be implicated in the experience of eating the fruit and being condemned by God. In fact, the tendency to blame the woman for the man's sins is even mocked in the story itself when the wimpy man tries it. But it is only mocked if the storyteller makes fun of it by his attitude. If read straight off the page, the irony and humor of the man's response can be missed, especially if it is read by a theologian.

The meaning of the Gospels

What did the Gospel stories mean in their original context? In light of the original character of the Gospels as stories told to an audience, the traditional definitions of meaning in relation to various theologies are not accurate. When you listen to and tell the stories, you simply don't come away from the experience with theological concepts and arguments in mind. The experience is much too visceral, dynamic and interactive. Theological concepts can be derived from the experience and may even be an important element in the meaning that may emerge with further reflection. But it is not the dominant character of the meaning of the story-hearing experience.

The meaning is dynamic, rather than static. Rather than dwelling on ideas and creedal formulas, the meaning has more to do with relationships: relationship with Jesus, with the disciples, with the persons Jesus heals, with the crowd, with Jesus' opponents, and with God. It also has a lot more to do with the relationship between the storyteller and the listener: "I like her. She strikes me as being credible and believable. She really believes the story she is telling." The story may address issues of belief in Jesus but belief that has more to do with confidence and willingness to follow than it does with a theological creed.

We need to distinguish the meaning of the Gospels as told and heard story from their meaning as narratives studied in silence. Furthermore, the original meaning of the Gospels as story meaning needs to be distinguished from theological and historical meaning. There are more points of intersection with narrative meaning. But it is a different experience. Sitting alone reading a document is a

different field of meaning than being part of a diverse audience listening to the telling or reading of an oral story.

In order to define the meaning of the Gospels in their original context and for the purpose of this conversation, let us call the Gospel as sounds told by a storyteller or reciter “story.” And the later development of meaning associated with the Gospel read alone in silence by individual readers we will call “narrative.” Likewise, let us reserve the name, “reader” for its present dominant designation of a person who is reading a text in silence. We will call a person who is reading a text aloud to an audience a “reciter” and a person who is telling a story from memory we will call a “storyteller.” And a member of a storytelling audience, we will name a “listener.”

What are then the differences in meaning that emerge from the study of biblical narratives in their original system of communication and in the documentary communication system of the 18th-20th centuries?

“Meaning as reference” is Hans Frei’s name for the system of meaning in biblical hermeneutics in the 18th century. To quote Frei:

...hermeneutical theorists later in the century (18th), distinguishing between *Wort* and *Sache*, regarded the *Sache* of a biblical narrative as either space-time event (meaning as ostensive reference) or as teaching which could in turn be either dogma or general religious ideas (meaning as ideal reference). In either case, or in a mixture of the two, meaning is referential. (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 101)

This system of meaning has continued to be the primary framework for biblical interpretation since the 18th century. The quest of the historical Jesus, most recently in the work of the Jesus seminar, has focused on the meaning of the Gospels as ostensive reference, as sources for the meaning of the texts as historical descriptions of what actually took place in the 1st century, i.e., what Jesus really taught and what really happened as distinguished from the theologically motivated distortions by later authors. And the dominant system for commentaries on biblical narrative has continued to be the identification of their referential meaning in

relation to the ideas of the authors, their theological meaning. This construct, “meaning as reference,” is what the world of historical criticism has found meaningful. Meaning as reference, both ideal and ostensive reference, is based on the reading of biblical narratives in silence as documents.

In the late 20th century there has been a major movement to read the narratives as narrative rather than as history or theology. This has involved the adaptation of the methods and categories of contemporary literary criticism of fiction for the analysis of biblical narrative. “Narrative criticism” of biblical narrative has developed an elaborate theoretical construct for this work. But, as my conversation with Bob Tannehill reflects, this critical methodology has also been based on the reading of biblical narratives in silence as documents with implied authors and implied readers. Narrative criticism then shares with theological and historical criticism a common assumption about the appropriate medium in which biblical narrative is to be experienced. In this sense, we can characterize all of this critical work together as exploring various dimensions of “narrative meaning.”

What is the difference between “story meaning” and “narrative meaning?” (Note – There are intermediate stages between story and narrative as I am using these terms here. Stories were told by a storyteller, then read aloud by a reader to an audience, then read aloud by individuals who had texts, then read in silence but still heard in the mind by individuals who had grown up hearing the stories, and only at the end of this long evolutionary process, readers looking at texts and hearing nothing either present or residual in their minds.) The difference between narrative meaning and story meaning is rooted in the difference between the perceptual systems of the eye and the ear. The exclusive source of meaning in narrative is the visual registers of the brain. Story meaning is physiologically more complex. With story, the dominant perceptual system is the ear recording the sounds of the story that are being produced by the storyteller or reader. But the eye registers the movement of the face and the body of the storyteller or reader as well as the overall setting, other people in the audience, etc. There may be elements of touch, taste or smell in the overall

environment of a story listening experience but they have little to no importance in the meaning of the story.

Walter Ong has written about the differences in the psychodynamics of sound and sight extensively. These are some of the categories in his most extensive description of the characteristics of oral communication and its distinctive elements of meaning (*Orality and Literacy*, 31-77):

- 1) Sounded word as power and action
- 2) You know what you can recall: mnemonics and formulas
- 3) Aggregative (formulaic) rather than analytic
- 4) Redundant (repetitions)
- 5) Close to the human lifeworld (not abstract or ideological)
- 6) Highly agonistic (lots of name-calling and praise)
- 7) Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
- 8) Sound registers interiority; sight registers surfaces
- 9) Sound is unifying and centralizing; sight is dissecting and distinguishing

That is, there are significant differences of meaning that are directly related to the primary sensory register employed in communication. Given these characteristics of the sensory registers, we can see why the meaning of the Gospel story will move away from the characteristic meanings of sound perception and toward the meanings associated with sight perception as it becomes, over the course of centuries, a narrative. Thus, sound is essential to story. For narrative, sound is at least irrelevant and may be intrusive and alien. I don't like people trying to talk to me while I'm deep in a novel and, as my various house mates since childhood would readily testify, I have been very skilled at shutting them out.

We can add to this list of the differences in perception some of the characteristics of story that are absent from narrative. In story, there is an actual audience and a storyteller or reciter. A story is an event, a happening that takes place in interactions between people. In this sense story is a public event, even if the story is told in a house. Stories can also be told in private, such as at bedtime for a child. But even this is more public or interactive than a reader sitting alone reading a book in silence.

The story in the ancient world required memory. If the story is told, the storyteller tells the story from memory. But the reciter of an ancient text also had to memorize the text before reading it because of the character of the texts: no punctuation, no separation of words, and in Hebrew texts, no vowels. It is a different kind of memory that requires a different memorization process. But in either case, memory is involved as a dimension of meaning. In narrative, on the other hand, memory is once again irrelevant.

The meaning of a story is directly related to the dynamics of the relationship between the storyteller and the audience. A good storyteller establishes a warm relationship with the audience at the beginning of a story and interacts with the audience throughout the telling by non-verbal cues (gestures, smiles, a wink, a look that comments on the story) as well as with verbal asides and hints that guide the audience and maintain the relationship with the teller. Audience response shapes the story every second and can change radically in an instant. Listener response is very different from reader response. If the storyteller senses that the audience is losing engagement or is becoming upset, the teller will adjust immediately or even stop the story and address the problem directly.

A dimension of this dynamic is that there is far more vulnerability for a storyteller telling a story than an author writing a text. In story it is an ever-present possibility that you can lose the audience or even that the audience will turn against you. One highly negative person can have a major effect on the meaning of a story for an entire audience. As a result of this, storytellers make steady efforts to generate a high degree of active engagement and involvement with the audience. The worst that happens with the author of a narrative is that a reader, who the author never meets, may put down the book and never read it again. Well, maybe the worst is that the reader may write a highly critical review and publish it in some journal.

There are also major differences between the options for the receivers in story and narrative. As part of an audience listening to a story, an individual listener has a different set of options than a reader. One can stay or leave, engage or tune out including going to sleep, or adopt an attitude of either cynicism or approval. If you get

sleepy, you can continue listening through the fog and when you wake up the story is still going on. In story events, there are social pressures not to disrupt the story by getting up and walking out but, if you're really turned off, it is almost always a possibility. On the positive side, one can actively participate in the story by encouraging the storyteller, interacting positively with other members of the audience, or reacting physically to the story with clapping, moving, smiling, etc. But finally the listener can't control the storyteller or the story. The audience can only react to the storyteller. Nevertheless, in a storytelling event, there is a profound sense in which the storyteller and the audience are co-creators of the story experience. The meaning of the story is shaped by the interaction of the audience and the storyteller.

A reader has many of these same options but they have no effect on the story itself. The document doesn't change or adapt to the reader. Nevertheless, a reader has almost total control of the reading event. If bored, the reader can put the narrative down at a moment's notice. And if a reader goes to sleep, the narrative stops. The book can be read all at once or in little bits and pieces. A reader can skim fast or read slowly savoring each detail. A slow reader can read aloud. But there is rarely if ever the same degree of emotional intensity in reading a document alone that is possible in hearing a story.

A major difference between story and narrative is the fun factor. There is a wide repertoire of possibilities for humor in story that are not present in narrative. A storyteller can do sight gags, jokes with tone, take an attitude, or make fun of a character. A storyteller can even make jokes about herself. The general assumption about the gospels is that they are "serious" and that is true of gospel narratives. But that has never been my experience of the gospels when they are told. Different storytellers find different elements of humor and fun in the stories. But it almost always happens in some way that people laugh at some point in the story. That never happens in Scripture lessons in church and rarely in my experience of reading the narratives in silence. The fun is in the interaction of the story, the teller and the audience.

Story is less contemplative and reflective than narrative. It is hard to pray or think while listening to a storyteller tell a story. Prayer and thought is certainly invited by many biblical stories, but after the story is over rather than during its telling. With the narrative, especially if it is read slowly and aloud, there are abundant opportunities to stop reading and meditate on a particular element of the narrative. Thus, the practice of *lectio divina*, of slow reading aloud listening for God's voice, grew out of individuals reading a narrative text, not out of stories being told. The storyteller has to keep the story moving in order to keep the audience's attention and, therefore, is constantly trying to get the audience to look and listen, not to go off somewhere into woo-woo land and start thinking.

Surprisingly, telling the stories has made it clear that it is easier, at least for me, to listen to biblical stories for a long period of time than it is read them in silence as narratives. I rarely read biblical narratives at length. I have read each of the Gospels and many of the narrative books of the Old Testament at one time. But it is hard work that requires real intention. Normally I rarely read biblical narratives for even half an hour at one time. Biblical narratives are simply not as engaging to read in silence as contemporary novels that I will sometimes read in one day of intense reading. (Most recently, I read *The DaVinci Code* the day after Christmas in something like sixteen hours until 1 or 2 AM.) I remember, at an early stage in my research, reading Mark and trying to imagine the possibility of it being read or told from beginning to end. And I literally couldn't imagine it. It wasn't until I heard a black storytelling preacher tell stories for more than an hour with the audience cheering for more at the end that I could imagine what might have happened.

Since then, I have listened to performances of biblical stories for anywhere from one to three hours with relative ease and often with great joy (it all depends on the skill of the storyteller). We have now done annual epic tellings for a whole evening of the NOBS festival gathering for more than fifteen years. We have learned how to do these evenings better over the years. But from the beginning of the festivals, it has always been one of the highlights. The probability is high that evenings of biblical storytelling were a primary source of entertainment in the communities of the biblical period. The

Passover haggadah is a ritualized evening of storytelling that probably reflects what happened on many more informal occasions. The hearing of a long story creates a whole different framework of meaning than short readings.

Thus, there are major differences between narrative meaning and story meaning. They are different fields of experience that result in different kinds of response and impact.

The setting and purpose of the Gospels

The investigation of the Gospels for their narrative meaning has been based on the communication culture of the Enlightenment when texts normatively became silent documents to be studied in silence by a critically detached reader. Implicit in this paradigm has been a series of assumptions about biblical narratives in their original historical context:

- 1) the intended audience was individual readers who read the texts in silence
- 2) the documents were written by the editing and recomposition of written sources
- 3) the system of distribution was extensive so that each reader could have their own manuscript
- 4) the meaning of the documents for the original readers had the same locus of meaning as for readers now, the meaning of the text as a source of referential meaning as theology and history.

From these assumptions, a general picture of the Gospels has emerged that has dominated Gospel scholarship:

- 1) The intended audience of the Gospels was early Christian communities who believed that Jesus was the Messiah.
- 2) With the exception of the Matthew, the Gospels were primarily written for Gentile Christian communities.
- 3) The meaning of the Gospels was to strengthen the faith of these communities of Gentile Christian believers.
- 4) The most accurate way of describing the meaning of the Gospels is theological, that is, the language of ideas.

In the late 20th century, narrative criticism has emerged as an alternative to theological and historical interpretation. But it too has examined the gospels as documents read by individual readers. Even when there is a clear recognition that this is anachronistic, the methodological decision has often been to use the paradigm of the modern novel (reader, implied reader, narrator, implied author, etc.) because that is the dominant framework of contemporary readers. Narrative criticism does not primarily describe the meaning of the Gospels in the categories of theology. But in as far as the goal of narrative criticism has been the identification of the meaning of the narratives in their original context (which many narrative critics do not), most studies using narrative criticism have based their conclusions on the assumption that it doesn't make any difference whether the narratives are studied in silence or told as stories.

The picture that has emerged from my study of the Gospels as stories that were performed for audiences in the ancient world is quite different:

- 1) The evangelists assume that their audiences have heard the Septuagint read aloud extensively and can recognize allusions to the Greek texts of the Scriptures. Furthermore, the storytellers assume that their audiences know the overall framework of the whole corpus of the Scriptures: the Torah, the prophets, the Psalms. It is part of the audiences' mental and imaginative world.
- 2) The evangelists assume that their audiences share distinctively Jewish norms in relation to Gentiles and Samaritans, the cleanliness laws, the dietary laws, and the authority of the chief priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees.
- 3) The evangelists assume that some of their audiences are Gentiles who do not know Aramaic and basic Jewish customs and practices and they make efforts to include them as part of the audience.
- 4) The evangelists assume that their listeners do not believe Jesus is the Messiah and that they will experience the suffering and death of the Messiah as a reversal of their expectations.

From these characteristics of the interaction between the storytellers and their audiences, a different picture of the character of the Gospels has emerged:

- 1) The audience of the Gospels was first of all Jews; with the possible exception of Matthew, Gentiles were included in the audience as a secondary group.
- 2) The principal original setting for the recital of the Gospels was tellings and readings in synagogues and homes.
- 3) The audiences are addressed as non-believers and the design of the stories is structured to invite the listeners to believe that Jesus is the Messiah; believers were included in the audiences but they are addressed as non-believers.
- 5) The meaning was not theological or in any major way abstract but was instead relational, dynamic, and highly emotional. The story leads the listener into an experience of being implicated both in Jesus' death and in the deliverance from the powers of evil that is implicit in the stories of Jesus' ministry, passion, death and resurrection.
- 6) The decision about whether to act on this experience is up to each listener and each Gospel ends with that issue.

Thus, the basic outlines of the dominant picture of the Gospels in their original context that has been drawn by the study of the Gospels as narratives appears in this light to be heavily anachronistic and to read back into the ancient world the experience of the Gospels in the world of the 18th to the 20th century. It is in this later culture that the Gospels are primarily read aloud to churches of Gentile Christian believers and studied in silence by readers who find meaning in the documents as history and theology. This is not surprising but is only what one would predict if a later cultural communication culture is being projected back onto the products of an earlier communication culture. It is almost inevitable.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from storytelling research on biblical narratives produces a very different picture of the Gospels in their original context than earlier documentary methods. Occasions such

as this gathering are a primary opportunity for historical research. We need to test these differences by detailed analysis.

Let me tell the truth about what emerged from listening to and telling the stories. I have been afraid to even write this conclusion for more than thirty years because of its apparent arrogance and the scandal associated with its early announcement. But the basic perception hasn't changed since I first started memorizing and chanting Mark's passion narrative in 1968. With all appropriate humility and acknowledgement that I love all things highly dramatic, it might as well be shared. In the context of the experience of telling and hearing biblical stories with audiences, it appears that all of the data that has been gathered about biblical narratives from their study as documents read alone in silence is subject to systematic distortion of the original meanings and settings of the narratives. Silent study by individual detached readers of texts is an anachronistic process that results in a distorted and inaccurate perception of the meaning of these stories that were told by storytellers/readers and heard by audiences.

Since I am on such a roll, let me be even more of a fool. This experience has driven me to conclude that the data gathered by silent study of the texts of biblical narratives is invalid as a source of accurate information about their original meaning. This includes even lexicographical data in which the meaning of words is so deeply connected with the connotations that are built up by the sounds and feelings associated with the words in earlier stories. The words must be read aloud in order to activate the same centers of our brains as were activated in theirs. And they must be told to audiences in order to sense the relational dynamics. This does not mean that all of our gathered knowledge over these three centuries is false. Much of what we have learned is true and accurate. But this knowledge needs to be reevaluated because of the degree to which these anachronistic assumptions have shaped it. This includes the various documentary hypotheses for the composition of the Pentateuch and the Gospels, the interpretive categories of theology and history that have so shaped our understanding of the stories' meaning, the hopeful development of narrative criticism, and the overall system of interpretation that Christian churches practice in worship and education, for which these stories are foundational.

Does this then mean that we chuck biblical scholarship and share our storytelling impressions in an endless cavalcade of subjectivity? By no means. But if we are serious about establishing our knowledge and interpretation of these ancient sacred stories on a sound foundation, we must change our methods. Many will say that trying to discover the original meaning is irrelevant and impossible. Irrelevant I doubt, but it is certainly difficult. My conviction is that the effort has been revealing and has provided the community of scholarship and faith with a common place to gather with all of our differences. In order to explore the original meaning, we need a new methodology for the study of biblical stories that is built on a foundation of the memorization and telling of the stories to audiences. In light of the impact of the medium on the perception of meaning, any scholar who wants to discover and put forward an interpretation of the meaning, setting, or tradition history of a biblical narrative in its original context should develop and test the interpretation by extensive telling and/or recital of the story to audiences.

Next steps

If we decided that this was true, what would be some next steps? Here are some questions that would be a place to start.

How do we document the data of the telling of stories in scholarly research?

How do we include storytelling data in scholarly discussion in a manner that will carry authority? The present media system of biblical scholarship functionally excludes and dismisses the introduction of this data.

How do we overcome scholarly resistance to involvement in an oral communication system? How do we change the way in which scholars are trained?

Could we develop a working relationship between the Network of Biblical Storytellers and the Society of Biblical Literature?

How do we change the media system of biblical scholarship so that it does not exclude storytelling data from its research methodologies? Could we send sound files over the internet as an integral part of biblical scholarship? Could we make CD's an integral part of the Journal of Biblical Literature and other scholarly journals? Could we make videos of storytelling events as a way of including storytelling experience in biblical scholarship?