

*The Intersection of Contemporary Biblical Storytelling with
Storytelling in the World of Antiquity: Invitation to a Conversation*
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I engage this conversation from the perspective of my own research: on reconstructing storytelling in the world of antiquity, on social memory, and on the impact of studies in orality on studies of the biblical text.¹ I begin with the assumption that much of the biblical narrative was shaped by and likely arose within oral, storytelling circles. This seems to me to be self-evident. In a time and place where the number of people who could read and/or write is estimated to have been somewhere around 5%, the primary mode of discourse was unquestionably the spoken word.² Further, studies of written remains suggest that texts which were written were intended to be read aloud.³ As a result, stories were not confined to the written page but re-entered the free-flowing world of oral exchange as they were given voice by first one storyteller and then another.⁴ According to Vernon Robbins, there was, indeed, an *expectation* that oral stories would appear in written texts and

¹ *The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter-Witness in Early Christian Communities* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004) – see especially chapters 1, 2, 4 and 9; “The Implications of “Orality” for Studies of the Biblical Text,” presented at *Orality, Narrativity, Memory: A Tribute to the Scholarship of Werner Kelber*, Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

² Meir Bar-Ilan. “Illiteracy in the Land of Israel in the First Centuries C.E.,” in *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society*, Vol. 2, ed. Simcha Fishbane and Stuart Schoenfeld with Alain Goldschläger (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV) 56. William V. Harris suggests a literacy rate of 15% for urban males (*Ancient Literacy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]) 257.

³ Paul J. Achtemeier. “*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990) 3-27.

⁴G. Bartholomew, “Feed My Lambs,” *Semeia* 39 (1987) 74; T. Boomershine, “Peter’s Denial as Polemic of Confession,” *Semeia* 39 (1987) 74; J. Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 106; E. Nielsen, *Oral Tradition Studies in Biblical Theology*, 34-35; B. Rosenberg, “The Complexity of Oral Tradition,” 73-90.

written stories would be heard as oral texts.⁵ Since the ‘authority’ of biblical texts was established only over an extended period of time and certainly not before 100 CE, there is no reason to assume that written texts brought an end to the circulation of stories recorded in these same texts.⁶ Consequently, it is difficult, prior to the second century CE (and very likely later), to establish a clear distinction between “oral bible” and “written bible.”

It is at this point that I see my scholarly interests coming into dialogue with the *National Organization of Biblical Storytellers*: What insights can we gain into the circulation of biblical narratives, how they attained their shape and were re-shaped in performance, their rhetorical functions in relation to specific audiences, how they were heard and interpreted by those audiences, and a host of other questions from observation of biblical storytelling in twenty-first century contexts? In this paper I will identify questions (suggestive rather than comprehensive) arising from my own research that I hope to explore during this Seminar. These will be introduced as a series of observations, each followed by questions in italics. Those who have read my book will find lots of repetition below.

Oral and Written Text

⁵ Vernon K. Robbins. “Progymnastic Rhetorical Composition and Pre-Gospel Traditions: A New Approach.” In *The Synoptic Gospels*. Ed. Camille Focant (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993) 111-47.

⁶ C. H. Dodd, “Thirty Years of New Testament Study,” *Religion in Life* 47 (1978) 324-325; J. Foley, *Traditional Oral Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 5; R. L. Fox, “Literacy and Power in Early Christianity,” in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. A. K. Bowman and G. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 127; E. Nielsen, *Oral Tradition Studies in Biblical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1954) 34-35; H. Koester, “Written Gospels or Oral Traditions?” *JBL* 113 (1994) 29.

Doane observes that the “paramount difference between written and oral text is that oral text cannot be viewed as a fixed object.”⁷ When a speaker verbalizes the text of the Gospel of Matthew, for example, small details may change, asides may be introduced, but the ordering of the text will remain the same, as will the overall rhetorical structure of the text. The performance of the text is, effectively, a recitation. This is not necessarily true of oral text. In oral text, critical revisions may be introduced into the narrative or an episode framed in different ways that produce significantly different rhetorical effects. This is because oral text tends to be extemporaneous: a response to a particular situation, or an interjection into normal conversation.⁸

Does storytelling represent a sub-group within the category ‘oral text’ which tends to remain more stable and be less extemporaneous? Does this depend on the kind of story told and/or who tells the story? Who sets the parameters? To what degree are the stories told by members of NOBS “recitations” and to what degree might they be classified as ‘oral text’? At what point does the one become the other? How do should we understand the “stability” that is characteristic of oral text in relation to the “instability” which is characteristic of oral performance? – I.e., at what point does a story lose its stability as tradition and become a new narrative altogether?

The Storytellers

⁷A. Doane, "Oral Texts, Intertexts, and Intratexts," in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. J. Clayton and E. Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) 78.

⁸K. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991) 34-54; B. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "A Parable in Context: A Social Interactional Analysis of Storytelling Performance," *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, ed. D. Ben-Amos and K. Goldstein (the Hague, Netherlands: Mouton and Co., 1975) 105-130.

In my reconstruction of storytelling in the world of antiquity I found references to two kinds of storytellers: professional and informal. The two were distinguished largely by the form of remuneration they received: professional storytellers were paid for the stories they told, informal storytellers received only praise or censure; the stories told by formal and informal storytellers were, for the most part, the same.⁹ Plato and Plutarch, for example, complain that adults were drawn to worship of the gods because they first heard the stories of these gods in the home when they were children.¹⁰

In the context of informal storytelling events, anyone could, ostensibly, assume the role of storyteller. Kenneth Bailey has observed in his study of storytelling in Middle Eastern villages that the role of storyteller is fluid, shifting from occasion to occasion depending on whom is present: In a mixed group, consisting of men, women, and children, it will generally fall to older, more gifted male storytellers or socially prominent men. Among women and children, it will generally fall to more gifted female storytellers or socially prominent women.¹¹ However, these divisions are not absolute. In the primary source materials both men and women are identified as storytellers.¹² Both tell stories related to their experiences, the experiences of others, or about the gods.¹³ It is only upon examining to whom the stories are told and where they are told that evidence of "gender

⁹Plato, *Laws* X.887.D; Plutarch, *Theseus* 23.3. See also Scobie, "Storytellers, Storytelling and the Novel in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," 243. Exceptions would include some of the stories belonging to the mystery religions.

¹⁰Plato, *Laws* X.887D; Plutarch, *Theseus* 23.3.

¹¹ Kenneth Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition," *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991) 40.

¹²The references to professional storytellers are not gender specific.

¹³Dégh observes that it is not a preference for certain tales that describes women's folklore, but rather the manner in which the story is told, what is stressed and what point of view is presented (Linda Dégh, *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration* [Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1995] 69).

spheres" in storytelling arises. Men are described telling stories to men or to mixed audiences of men and women. Women are described telling stories to women and young children. Men are depicted, most often, telling stories at banquets or while traveling on a journey—that is, in the public realm. Women are depicted, most often, telling stories at home—that is, in the private realm. Although this division along gender lines is consistent with the patriarchal social structure characteristic of the ancient Mediterranean world, it is well to keep in mind that the sources present an idealized or, at the least, a stereotypical picture.¹⁴ It is likely that this ideal was compromised in everyday life.

In the primary sources, men are frequently described telling stories about their own adventures whereas women are rarely described doing so.¹⁵ More often they are described telling stories about the gods, love stories, or "gossiping" about other people (although the baker in Apuleius' *Metamorphosis* [X.34] provides at least one example of a male gossip).¹⁶ Yet recent studies in women's folklore indicate that personal narrative is a significant component in women's storytelling.¹⁷ Since this sharing of personal narrative tends to occur only in the company of other

¹⁴Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993) 28-62, 117-148.

¹⁵I found only four examples of women telling a "personal narrative" (Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 8.15; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IX.325-391; IX.325-391; XIII.738-989). In each case, the storytellers are in the company of other women. One possible exception is found in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIV.130-154. Here a sibyl tells a man a story of how she was denied eternal life because she spurned Phoebus' love.

¹⁶Men also tell love stories and stories about the gods, but in proportionately far fewer numbers.

¹⁷Dégh, *Narratives in Society* 66; Susan Kalčík, ". . . like Ann's gynecologist or the time I was almost raped," *Women and Folklore*, ed. C. Farrer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975) 8; M. Yacom, "Woman to Woman: Fieldwork and the Private Sphere," 47. A study by Langellier and Peterson notes that when sharing personal narratives, the women will often place themselves in a minor or prototypical role in order to deflect focus from themselves (Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, "Spinstorying: An Analysis of Women's Storytelling," *Performance, Culture and Identity*, ed. Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1992) 157-79.

women, it seems likely that women told stories about their own lives more often than is indicated in these texts written by men. Studies in contemporary folklore may provide an additional insight into the differences between stories told by men and women. These studies observe that the difference is not in the stories themselves, but in how the stories are told. Specifically, stories told by women stress the woman's point of view.¹⁸ In contrast, where the story told by a man is included in the Greco-Roman texts, the story revolves around a male character—often the storyteller himself.

Who are they storytellers in NOBS? Have they self-selected or been selected? Would they be considered formal or informal storytellers? What kind of authority might be associated with each role? What kind of 'remuneration' do they receive? What roles do they have in their congregations? Has this role shifted since they became storytellers and in what ways? If there is more than one storyteller in the congregation, how are storytellers selected for particular storytelling occasions? Does gender impact when and where stories are told? Does gender impact what stories are told or the way in which the story is told (i.e. what kind of language is used)? If not gender, do other factors become important such as economic class, religious denomination, or sexual orientation?

The Audience

¹⁸Dégh, *Narratives in Society*, 69, 151; R. Jordan, "The Vaginal Serpent and other themes from Mexican-American Women's Lore," *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*, ed. R. Jordan and S. Kalčík (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) 33; J. Langlois, "Belle Gunness, the Lady Bluebeard: Narrative Use of a Deviant Woman," *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*, ed. R. Jordan and S. Kalčík (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) 113-114. This can be demonstrated in the handful of samples drawn from Greco-Roman texts. For example, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, each daughter of Minyas tells a story which revolves around the thoughts and actions of the female characters. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV.32-167, IV. 168-273, 274-388. See also IX.2850325; X.559-679; Apuleius, *Metamorphosis* IV.27-VI.25; Xenophon, *An Ephesian Tale* 3.9. Since these texts are authored by men, it is possible that the stories are told as men envisioned a woman would tell them. However, this does not necessarily mean that the depiction is inaccurate, although it may be stereotypical.

In the world of antiquity, audiences were active participants in storytelling events. It is likely that the audience participated in determining who would assume the role of storyteller in any particular setting while the configuration of audience, setting and context influenced the choice of story told. A skilled storyteller would shape her story to the setting and interests of her audience, responding to questions or comments interjected in the course of the storytelling.

What is the relationship between the audience and the storyteller? What role does the audience play in the storytelling event? Is the audience an active participant in storytelling event? To what degree is 'audience' envisioned when working up a story for performance? In what ways does the storyteller respond to the audience? How does this interaction impact the 'interpretive moment' represented by the storytelling event?

Performance

Anne Wire has observed that “. . .writing . . . limits a story by recording only words, whereas storytelling depends for effective communication as much on the speaker's tone, volume, pace, gestures and embodiment of direct discourse as on the words spoken.”¹⁹ Because this dimension of storytelling is culturally shaped, as demonstrated by Whit Shiner's work on performance in the world of antiquity,²⁰ it may be more appropriate to approach the topic of performance from a comparative angle: i.e., *what are the similarities and differences between storytelling in the world of antiquity and in the post-modern world of the twenty-first century in terms of performance? In what ways do tone, gesture, embodiment, and such reflect cultural*

¹⁹ Antoinette Clark Wire, *Holy Lives, Holy Deaths: A Close Hearing of Early Jewish Storytellers*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2002) 4.

²⁰ *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

cues and, consequently, function to interpret a narrative in relation to specific cultural contexts? What parameters, if any, determine what gestures, volume, pace, and such are appropriate to a text? Can these work to establish competing or even conflicting interpretations? How are such conflicts mediated?

Function

Storytelling is an act of social construction. This is to say that every act of storytelling has a rhetorical function. This function is revealed through performance (described above) but also by the ways in which a narrative both references and re-images specific social contexts. If the spoken word is to be successful in terms of its function, it must, at one and the same time, reflect the context in a way that hearers will recognize and with which they will identify, and engage the hearers to a degree sufficient to create in them the capacity to entertain new social boundaries ²¹

How is the cultural distance between text and performer recognized or acknowledged? How do you take a story which references a world significantly different from our own and tell it in such a way that a contemporary audience will experience the full rhetorical impact? How is the “rhetorical impact” determined? In what ways does the storyteller consciously or unconsciously develop intertextual interplay with their own life experience, life context, social customs, symbols, cultural memory, and such in the telling of stories and in what ways do these “interpret” the story for the audience?

Framing

The stories that we have inherited are embedded in larger narratives, specifically Gospels and Acts attributed to various apostles (if we include apocryphal

²¹ Vernon K. Robbins, “Probymnastic Rhetorical Composition and Pre-Gospel Traditions,” 146; Richard A. Horsley with Jonathon A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, Penn: Trinity Press International, 1999) 295.

texts). These larger narratives provide a literary frame which shapes the interpretation of the individual episodes or stories contained within the narrative. In contrast, oral stories may be framed by various episodes at the discretion of the storyteller. This string of episodes will be determined by the intersection of the storyteller with the audience, setting and circumstances of the storytelling event.

Framing need not be restricted to the way in which stories are ordered. Framing occurs in other ways as well: the physical context in which a storytelling event occurs, the events that immediately precede and follow, the make-up of the audience, the larger social, political or community context that is assumed by the storytelling event. All of these function in some way to shape the interpretation the story by a particular audience.

In what ways are the stories that are being told framed? To what degree is this “framing” the result of self-conscious decisions, and to what degree is it sub-conscious? If conscious, in what ways is the “frame” intended to interpret the story? Does the “frame” ever result in unexpected consequences or interpretations?

The Aural Nature of Storytelling

Storytelling is aural as well as oral. The aural nature of storytelling may be regarded as an aspect of its rhetorical function: i.e., *how do aural cues guide the audience through the narrative? What impact does sound have on how the story is received? How does this aural dimension impact interpretation?*

To what degree does NOBS attempt to be attentive to the aural dimension of texts when working in translation?

What are the differences between how a narrative is received aurally versus visually in terms of how we process and interpret that narrative?

Esoteric Quality of Biblical Storytelling

Distinctive to the stories recorded in Jewish and Christian texts is their esoteric quality, defined as "what one group thinks about itself and what it supposes others think of it."²² These stories involve individuals, events, and occasions that are specific to the Jewish or Christian community. Because they are community specific, they function to establish and defend group identity.²³ When outsiders do appear in the stories, they are a foil and serve to highlight the wisdom of the dominant group (i.e. Jews or Christians). This esoteric quality can also function within a specific community (writ large): The various versions that exist of some of biblical stories suggest that they also may have been told to defend or distinguish the identity of group against group within the larger community.²⁴

In what ways is NOBS about setting boundaries or establishing community identity? How is this identity determined? To what degree is it community specific? How does NOBS handle the use of 'foils' in storytelling in light of concern for the historic impact of biblical narratives on certain groups: i.e. Jews, women, African Americans in relation to issues of slavery, homosexuals. Are stories told to defend or distinguish group identity within the larger Christian community?

²²W. Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," *The Study of Folklore*, ed. A. Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965) 46.

²³Ibid. James Scott describes a similar phenomenon from a sociological perspective (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990] 160-162).

²⁴W. Kelber, "Jesus and Tradition," *Semeia* 65 (1994) 161.