

***Greco-Roman Textuality and
the Gospel of Mark
A Critical Assessment of Werner Kelber's
The Oral and the Written Gospel***

L. W. HURTADO
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Werner Kelber's The Oral and the Written Gospel set forth an ambitious and bold thesis concerning the Gospel of Mark as the revolutionary document that subverted the "orality" of the pre-Markan Jesus tradition and replaced it with "textuality." However, his characterizations of the nature of orality and textuality are not appropriate for the Greco-Roman setting of Mark and his proposal cannot, therefore, serve us well in understanding the appearance of the written Gospels and the intentions behind them. In this essay two main matters not given enough attention in previous assessments of Kelber's study are discussed: (1) the nature of Greco-Roman literacy, and (2) several relevant aspects of textuality in the Greco-Roman period, with particular reference to the Gospel of Mark.

Key Words: Kelber, orality, textuality, Gospel of Mark, literacy

Werner Kelber's *The Oral and the Written Gospel*¹ (hereafter referred to in the body of this essay by page numbers in round brackets) set forth an ambitious and bold thesis concerning the Gospel of Mark as the revolutionary document that subverted the "orality" of the pre-Markan Jesus tradition and replaced it with "textuality" (e.g., pp. 90-139). By this, Kelber meant much more than the widely shared view that Mark was the pioneer written account of Jesus' ministry that set the precedent for several subsequent written accounts. Kelber's thesis was that the Gospel of Mark introduced a radically new way of thinking of Jesus, the "linear hermeneutics" of writing and reading over against the earlier "oral hermeneutics" of the pre-Markan tradition. There are a number of components in Kelber's case that could be addressed critically, including his exegetical

1. Werner Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

handling of the Gospel of Mark itself.² But Kelber's case does not really rest upon or derive from an exegesis of Mark. Instead, his book depends almost entirely on his characterization of "orality" and "textuality" and his application of these conceptual categories to the Greco-Roman world of the Gospel of Mark. His discussion of the contents of Mark (chaps. 2-3), as well as his characterization of Q and Paul, are driven by and depend upon his orality/textuality categories.

In this paper, I shall argue that Kelber's characterizations of the nature of orality and textuality are not appropriate for the Greco-Roman setting of Mark and that his proposal cannot, therefore, serve us well in understanding the appearance of the written Gospels and the intentions behind them. I emphasize that this is a critique of the views expressed in Kelber's book, and that I do not attempt here to trace any possible further development in the thought of Kelber on these matters. Given the importance of the questions Kelber addressed, in particular what the appearance of the Gospel of Mark represented in the history of first-century Christianity, it is appropriate to assess the validity of his attempt to answer them in his oft-cited book. The net results of my analysis are obviously negative for the views advanced in Kelber's book. So let me indicate at the outset that, though his case seems to me seriously flawed, scholars can be grateful to Kelber for having helped to focus attention on important matters about earliest Christianity.

Some of my criticisms may overlap or echo comments of others, but this essay provides additional reasons for questioning Kelber's use of orality/textuality categories, especially with reference to the Gospel of Mark.³ Most recently, John Halverson gave a searching critique of Kelber.⁴ In addition to showing weaknesses in some of Kelber's conceptual categories (e.g., Kelber's notions about "orality" and "textuality"), Halverson challenged Kelber's view of parables as a quintessential oral speech form, his view of Q as largely the product of Christian prophets, and his claim that the Markan passion narrative was totally a literary creation without oral precedents. I find Halverson's criticisms valid. In this essay I wish to discuss two main matters not given enough attention in previous assessments of Kelber's study: (1) the nature of Greco-Roman literacy, and (2) sev-

2. I have touched upon some other problems in Kelber's book with regard to the Gospel of Mark in my article, "The Gospel of Mark: Evolutionary or Revolutionary Document?" *JSNT* 40 (1990) 15-32.

3. See the earlier discussions of Kelber's views in *Semeia* 39 (1987), esp. T. E. Boomershine, "Peter's Denial as Polemic or Confession: The Implications of Media Criticism for Biblical Hermeneutics," 47-68.

4. John Halverson, "Oral and Written Gospel: A Critique of Werner Kelber," *NTS* 40 (1994) 180-95.

eral relevant aspects of textuality in the Greco-Roman period, with particular reference to the Gospel of Mark.

GRECO-ROMAN LITERACY

The first matter to address is Kelber's basis for using his orality/textuality categories in characterizing the cultural setting of the Gospel of Mark. Kelber himself offers no thorough, first-hand study of oral and written communication in the Greco-Roman world. Instead, his descriptions of orality and textuality depend almost entirely on the work of others, especially Walter Ong, but also such other figures as A. B. Lord (see, e.g., pp. xv–xviii, 14-24, 32-34).⁵ Scholarly discussion of "orality" has continued beyond these figures, but it is not my purpose to follow this discussion.⁶ Instead, I want to argue that, even on the basis of the works available at the time, Kelber's book must be judged flawed in approach and in conclusions.

It is important to note that the studies upon which Kelber depended are not historical analyses of the Greco-roman period. Instead, they are primarily concerned with the orality of pre-literate cultures and the effects of the advent of literacy and textuality upon human cultures and consciousness. Ong, Kelber's main mentor in these matters, refers to "the distinctive psychodynamics of the orally constituted mind," manifested in "primary oral cultures" ("no knowledge whatsoever of writing") and "residually oral cultures" (in which "the thought forms of primary orality variously assert themselves with ever-diminishing force as the technology of writing, later reinforced and transformed by print, is interiorized in the psyche").⁷ That is, the model of orality Kelber appropriates and distinguishes so sharply from textuality describes the dependence upon, and nature of, oral communication in illiterate or marginally literate cultures. These same studies on which Kelber has relied, however, also emphasize the differences between such cultures and those in which literacy has an established place and influence. So it appears that the relevance of the orality Kelber describes for understanding the pre-Markan stage of the Jesus tradition depends heavily upon whether the Greco-Roman cultural background of Mark can be accurately compared to pre-literate or marginally literate cultures.

5. See, e.g., A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960); W. J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); idem, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); idem, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1982). See esp. Kelber's acknowledgment of dependence upon Ong's theories in the preface (xvii).

6. See Halverson ("Oral and Written Gospel," 181-83) for criticism and references to studies of orality.

7. From Ong's Forward to Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*, xiv.

But before we examine this question, I must point out an apparent confusion and mis-use of these categories in Kelber's work. Kelber begins his discussion of oral transmission by writing as if the profound distinctions posited between oral cultures and literate cultures can be used to distinguish the acts of speaking and writing by individuals in any cultural setting (e.g., pp. 14-15). As any of us practiced in both oral and written composition know, there are differences in the processes, the dynamics, and the results. But, as Lord, Ong and others have shown, in cultures where both writing and oral discourse have a major place, each type of linguistic behavior affects the other to some degree, and the profound differences posited between primary oral cultures and cultures accustomed to writing cannot be used to distinguish speaking and writing of *individuals* in literate cultures. In other words, Kelber's attempt to attribute the distinctive hermeneutics and "psychodynamics" of the orality of oral cultures to oral communication in literate cultures is simply a fallacy in method that seems to go against the studies from which he has derived the categories of orality and textuality. At the risk of being redundant, I wish to emphasize that Lord, Ong and the others Kelber refers to all deal in terms of *oral cultures* (in which writing technology is either not known or not yet fully in place). Kelber tries to attribute the characterization of these oral cultures to the early Christian groups in the pre-Markan period, but this would be justified only if he could show that the early Christians were situated in such an oral culture.

Most NT scholars assume that the pre-Markan Jesus tradition was transmitted heavily in the oral medium, but the question is whether pre-Markan Christianity can be characterized as situated in a culture relatively free of the influences of textuality. Kelber himself seems to recognize this to some degree but his two and a half page discussion of Greco-Roman literacy is hardly adequate for his radical thesis and in any case does not bear up well under critical scrutiny.

Kelber begins this brief discussion by citing Roberts' characterization of the Greco-Roman world (p. 15): "The world into which Christianity was born was, if not literary, literate to a remarkable degree."⁸ And, after a quick historical review of the use of writing technology in the ancient near east, Kelber himself states, "Clearly, the Christian movement sprang up in a milieu that both in its Jewish and in its Hellenistic loyalties had long set a high premium on the written word" (p. 16). Certainly, the available evidence supports this picture.

8. C. H. Roberts, "Books in the Graeco-Roman World and in the New Testament," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 1.40.

The Hellenistic age introduced a period of apparently widespread literacy and popular education previously unknown.⁹ The "literary environment" of early Christianity was particularly rich and varied.¹⁰ And the mass of surviving letters from antiquity shows an impressively wide distribution of popular literacy.¹¹ All this suggests that the cultural background of early Christianity does not seem like a good example of a culture of "primary orality" or one where textuality is struggling to obtain cultural influence.

But, after beginning by summarizing the long heritage of reading and writing in the ancient near east, Kelber struggles to sidestep his own summary in a one-and-a-half-page defense of the position that the earliest Christian movement can nevertheless be approached as a kind of oral sub-culture (pp. 16-17). This defense consists of a contrast between the early Christian circles and the "literate Judaism" exemplified in the Qumran community, followed by a general characterization of "the total situation" into which early Christianity should be set. On neither count, however, does Kelber's defense stand up.

Granting for the moment that a limited contrast can be posited between the more scribally-oriented, priestly-dominated Qumran community and the earliest Christian groups, this does not justify approaching the early Christian circles as a kind of sub-culture of orality within the Greco-Roman Jewish culture of Palestine.¹² The evidence suggests that, especially in Jewish society, literacy was a valued and widely-shared competence and that the writing, reading, and hearing of texts had deeply and widely affected the population for centuries.¹³ In other words, the question is not whether early

9. See, e.g., W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (rev. ed.; Cleveland: World, 1952) 268-94. But see now William V. Harris (*Ancient Literacy* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989]), who minimizes the extent of literacy in the Greco-Roman period. It seems to me, however, that Harris uses an anachronistic (or kinder, perhaps, a maximalist) definition of literacy and thus undervalues evidence of widespread, though limited-competency, literacy.

10. D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

11. S. K.-Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

12. For more detailed discussion of the Palestinian Jewish setting, and the relevance of the Qumran material, see now Shemaryahu Talmon, "Oral Tradition and Written Transmission, or the Heard and Seen Word in Judaism of the Second Temple Period," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 121-58.

13. See, e.g., A. Demsky and M. Bar-Ilan, "Writing in Ancient Israel and Early Judaism," in *Mikra* (ed. M. J. Mulder; CRINT 2.1; Assen: Van Gorcum/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 10-37; S. Safrai, "Education and the Study of the Torah," in *The Jewish People in the First Century, Volume Two* (ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern; CRINT 1.2; Assen: Van Gorcum/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 945-70.

Christianity was a scribally-dominated movement, but whether the cultural setting can be characterized as dominated by pre-literate ("primary") orality.

In characterizing "the total context" of Greco-Roman Palestine, Kelber seriously misconstrues the evidence, producing an erroneous picture. For example, his claim that "Throughout antiquity writing was in the hands of an élite of trained specialists, and reading required an advanced education available only to few" (p. 17) oversimplifies the situation in comparison with the historical studies of literacy in Greco-Roman Palestine. True, then as now, there were formally trained persons especially skilled in writing, and advanced education was available only to a few. But beyond those with this advanced education there was a surprisingly wide popular literacy, and especially in Jewish circles there seem to have been a special appreciation of, and efforts to promote, literacy.¹⁴ The synagogue, the distinctive religious institution in ancient Jewish circles with its focus on scripture reading and teaching, was surely particularly important in promoting an appreciation for texts among the general population.¹⁵

As another example of Kelber's misleading portrayal of the situation, we may note his quotation of Wiseman's statement, "In general there was a low level of literacy" (p. 17). Kelber has apparently not noticed that Wiseman's comment, from an essay on books and writing in the pre-Hellenistic period, is found in a paragraph describing the state of writing/reading technology in the second millennium BCE. In the next paragraph of this essay, Wiseman describes subsequent developments in scripts and concludes, "The development of a single 22-letter system must soon have led to widespread literacy." In other words, Wiseman's earlier statement quoted by Kelber is irrelevant for the Greco-Roman period.¹⁶

We would, of course, be foolish to equate the literacy and place of orality in Greco-Roman culture with our modern western situation. Ong, whom Kelber quotes in support of his attempt to make Greco-Roman Palestine an oral culture (p. 17), is probably correct that ancient literate cultures were much more "committed to the spoken word" than our own.¹⁷ Paul Achtemeier has shown that the first

14. Demsky and Bar-Ilan, "Writing in Ancient Israel," 15, 37; W. Barclay, *Educational Ideals in the Ancient World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 11-48.

15. See, e.g., Josephus' references to the Jewish emphasis upon popular levels of education, *Ag. Ap.* 1.60; 2.171-78, 204. Even if somewhat idealized, Josephus' statements likely reflect cultural values characteristic of first-century Jewish society.

16. D. J. Wiseman, "Books in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (eds. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 1.37. For a critical survey of attempts to characterize education in the pre-Roman period, see J. L. Crenshaw, "Education in Ancient Israel," *JBL* 104 (1985) 601-15.

17. Ong, *Presence of the Word*, 55.

century was characterized by a rich appreciation for oral communication.¹⁸ But, again, Kelber has misconstrued the question, which is not whether Greco-Roman culture was like ours, but whether Greco-Roman culture can accurately be characterized as an oral culture in which textuality was not a widely influential cultural force. Kelber's answer to this question is simply wrong. And because he is wrong about this, his characterization of the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition in the pre-Markan period, which depends so completely on his attempt to make early Christianity an oral sub-culture, must be judged incorrect also.¹⁹

GRECO-ROMAN "TEXTUALITY"²⁰

The second major topic I wish to address here is Kelber's characterization of ancient textuality. As his thesis concerning Mark depends heavily on his understanding of ancient textuality, mistakes here are quite significant for Kelber's larger enterprise.

Kelber distinguishes texts, their composition, contents, delivery, and transmission, from oral communication quite sharply. Kelber writes, for example, that in oral communication, "words have no existence apart from speaker and hearers," "words actualize their meaning in the performance of oral delivery," and "speaker and hearers cooperate in an effort to assure a direct and immediate hermeneutical transaction"; but "with the written gospel the cooperation between speaker and hearers is abolished," and "the gospel has ceased to be directly accountable to audiences" (pp. 91-92). Kelber also claims that in texts such as Mark traditional Jesus material is set within new contexts, and individual pericopes function exclusively to further the larger thematic emphases of the writer (pp. 105-16). And Kelber frequently describes the relationship of Mark to pre-Markan tradition in harsh terms. Thus, as text, Mark "has brought about a freezing of oral life into textual still life," and has "deracinated and transplanted" the oral legacy "into a linguistic construct that has lost touch with the living, oral matrix" (p. 91). Mark represents "a veritable upheaval of hermeneutical, cognitive realities" (p. 91); it reflects a "linguistically disjunctive" operation, a "disruption of the oral synthesis" (p. 92); it

18. Paul J. Achtemeier, "*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (1990) 3-27.

19. Note the comment of Øivind Andersen: "It is basic to the understanding and evaluation of early Christian oral tradition that it exists within a culture with strong literacy as well as vigorous orality." ("Oral Tradition," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* [ed. H. Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991] 47).

20. For a juricious discussion of related matters, and copious references to literature, see now David E. Aune, "Prolegomena to the Study of Oral Tradition in the Hellenistic World," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, 59-106.

is "language divorced from human contexts and transposed into textuality" (p. 93); Mark's stance is "destructive" toward oral tradition (p. 94); in Mark, forms of speech "were forced out of circulation and frozen into a static condition" (p. 94). In textuality, oral tradition is "bereft of the context of communality shared by speaker and hearers" (p. 94); living words are "uprooted," "divitalized," and Mark represents "estrangement from oral life and alienation from its linguistic heritage" (p. 95).

All this constitutes a body of striking assertions, but does it stand up? For a variety of reasons, it does not. I will focus upon three major problems in Kelber's analysis: (1) his characterization of Mark's text, (2) his grasp of the Greco-Roman process of writing and reading texts, and (3) his assumptions about the fixity of texts in the ancient world. In discussing the first two problems, I shall draw upon the work of others. In the last point, I shall offer some observations not previously presented in discussions of Kelber's thesis.

Mark's Text

The first problem is Kelber's view of the relation of the text of Mark to oral tradition. Although he admits that Mark retains many indications of the oral background of the units of Jesus tradition adopted in Mark, Kelber claims that the "linearization," the narrative ordering, of material in Mark represents a significant departure from oral practices (e.g., p. 107). But, in a valuable article, Joanna Dewey has shown persuasively that Mark not only employs originally oral units of material and reflects many earmarks of orality at this level (admitted by Kelber, pp. 44-89), but also "*as a whole*" (italics hers) shows that it was composed by oral methods of composition and "for a listening, not a reading, audience."²¹ Specifically, Dewey points to such things as the episodic nature of the Markan narrative, the "additive and aggregative" character of the narrative (e.g., frequent use of *kai* connecting episodes), the richly visual character of Mark's narrative, the lack of linear plot and character development, the use of "acoustic responses" (forward and backward "echoes" in the narrative) both in small units and in the larger plan of the narrative.²² Her careful study of Mark's narrative construction in the light of the character-

21. J. Dewey, "Oral Methods of Structuring Narrative in Mark," *Int* 43 (1989) 32-44. The quotations are from pp. 33 and 42 respectively. Dewey analyzes Mark in light of the descriptions of oral narrative discussed in Plato, as described by E. A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1963).

22. See esp. Dewey, "Oral Methods," 38-42, for discussion of the "acoustic responses" in Mark.

istics of ancient oral narrative leads her to suggest that Mark may have been "a written transcription of oral narrative," or perhaps more probably, that "Mark is building on an oral storytelling tradition."²³

In the light of Dewey's study, then, Kelber's characterization of Markan textuality must be judged incorrect. The text of Mark, in substance and in form, is not the radical departure in kind from oral narrative alleged by Kelber. Mark in fact, both in individual units and in overall character, seems to be a text quite closely patterned after oral narrative. Mark's textuality, in other words, is one that is profoundly influenced by, and allied with, the nature of oral narrative.

In addition to evidence that Mark was much more closely patterned after oral narratives of Jesus, there is evidence that the pre-Markan oral narratives of Jesus were much more like Mark than Kelber allows. For example, R. B. Hays has shown persuasively that Paul's argument in Galatians presupposes a familiarity with a story of Jesus, that the Pauline kerygma included "a basic narrative pattern similar to that which informs the canonical gospels," and that Paul's letters mark a point within a historical development *towards* [emphasis his] the formulation of 'gospels,' i.e., explicitly literary articulation of the Jesus-story."²⁴

Thus, converging evidence indicates that Kelber's severe break between Mark and the pre-Markan oral Jesus tradition is an exaggeration that needs to be corrected.

Greco-Roman Reading

Dewey also suggests a second point that goes against Kelber's characterization of Mark, and a point that has earlier been raised in the discussion of Mark's Gospel.²⁵ This has to do with the ways ancient texts were read and used. Unlike most modern texts, ancient texts were characteristically prepared to be read *aloud* to an *audience*. This means that the line Kelber draws between the delivery of oral compositions and texts such as Mark is far too sharp because it is based on a view of texts as intended for individual readers, a view formed too much by modern textuality rather than the ancient practices. In the ancient setting, the public reader was expected to have prepared for "performance" of a text, and would often go beyond mere reading of the text and give explanatory asides and other assistance to

23. *Ibid.*, 43.

24. R. B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ* (SBLDS 56; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), esp. 256-58.

25. Dewey, "Oral Methods," 42-44, and T. E. Boomershine's article cited in n. 1. M. A. Beavis, ("The Trial before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53-65): Reader Response and the Greco-Roman Readers," *CBQ* 49 [1987] 581-96) also emphasizes the oral performance nature of ancient reading of texts such as Mark.

the audience.²⁶ We may in fact have an authorial directive to the public reader of Mark in 13:14 ("Let the reader [*ho anaginoskon*] understand"), where such a reader may be urged to be able to explain for the audience the phrase "desolating sacrilege" (alluding to Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).²⁷

In light of the ancient practice of reading texts before audiences, with interaction between audience, text, and reader, Dewey and others have shown that Kelber's views of important features of Mark, such as the negative portrayal of the disciples and the abrupt ending at 16:8, are wrong. Pointing both to ancient use of narratives of warning examples of how not to behave, and to the more complex dynamics of identification with narrative characters in oral performance of texts, Dewey suggests cogently that "a first-century audience hearing the Gospel would probably take the negative portrayal of the disciples much less seriously than contemporary Marcan scholars do."²⁸ Likewise, in an oral performance of Mark, the "open" ending at 16:8 "might function very well," allowing for lively interaction and application.²⁹ These are important points, because in Kelber's case Mark's negative portrayal of the disciples is made crucial exegetical evidence that Mark intended a break with, and condemnation of, all authorities of "orality."³⁰

26. For a more complete discussion of ancient reading practices and their relevance to texts such as Mark, see M. A. Beavis, *Mark's Audience: The Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4:11-12* (JSNTSup 33; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

27. Dewey's suggestion ("Oral Methods," 35) that the directive is to the public reader of *Daniel* is unpersuasive. Her suggestion that 13:37 is directed to the ancient audiences of Christians is much more sound.

28. Ibid., 42. See also, e.g., R. C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *JR* 57 (1977) 386-405; idem, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979) 57-95; J. Dewey, "Point of View and the Disciples in Mark," *SBL 1982: Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 21; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982) 97-106; C. Focant, "L'Incompréhension des Disciples dans le deuxième Évangile," *RB* 82 (1985) 161-85; and the summary of recent discussion by F. J. Matera, *What Are They Saying about Mark?* (New York: Paulist, 1987) 38-55; D. J. Hawkin, "The Incomprehension of the Disciples in the Marcan Redaction," *JBL* 91 (1972) 491-500.

29. Ibid., 43. See also N. Petersen, "When Is the End Not the End? Literary Reflections on the Ending of Mark's Narrative," *Int* 34 (1980) 151-66. In fact, the common notion that 16:8 portrays the women failing to obey the command of the "young man" may well be an incorrect interpretation. See E. S. Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983) 29-48; D. R. Catchpole, "The Fearful Silence of the Women at the Tomb: A Study in Markan Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 18 (1977) 3-10. I too have proposed that 16:8 probably does not present the women as disobeying the command to communicate to the disciples, and that "they did not speak to anyone" means "anyone else" other than the disciples. See my essay, "Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark—And Beyond," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (ed. R. N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 9-29.

30. Cf. Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*, 96-105.

Kelber recognizes in passing the oral reading of texts but tries to dismiss its relevance for his case by insisting that, unlike the situation of the oral composition, the audience is not present in the composition of a text (p. 115). Thus, in his view, a text is under the complete control of the author alone, while an oral composition involves more influence of audience upon the composer. But this distinction also is simplistic. As anyone who has studied or practiced effective oral performance knows, what is performed is usually not composed fully impromptu, but is prepared in various ways beforehand with a view to the audience. Likewise, a text composed for oral performance, even today (such as a public lecture or sermon), is characteristically written with an audience in mind and is styled for effective oral presentation, unlike a modern text (such as a scholarly journal article) that is prepared for private reading and reflection. Thus, in oral compositions, the author has considerably more control over the composition than Kelber recognizes, and in written compositions for oral performance the anticipated audience exerts more influence than Kelber grants. There are degrees of difference, but there is not the absolute distinction Kelber alleges.³¹

We may note the absence in Mark of any authorial self-disclosure (cf. Luke 1:1-4) or recommendation (cf. John 21:24) as an indication that the author saw the work as not simply his own but rather a text that incorporated the contents and general shape of the Jesus tradition already in circulation among at least some Christian groups. This in turn suggests that in Mark the tradition, and perhaps the anticipated audience, has likely exerted some significant influence upon the text that the author wrote. This influence may well have been indirect, and, to be sure, the author seems to exhibit some degree of authorial influence upon the tradition. But it is likely that the Markan gospel is the result of a dialectic between author and audience.

Textual Fixity

Finally, there is another problem in Kelber's case, involving his characterization of the fixity of texts. Succinctly stated, Kelber seems to have worked from a very modern view of *printed* texts and shows insufficient awareness of the practices of ancient writers and the nature of ancient *manuscript* technology as a vehicle of the written word.³²

31. Thus, e.g., Kelber's claim, "As text, the gospel has ceased to be directly accountable to audiences" (ibid., 92) is flatly incorrect.

32. For introductions to the kind of acquaintance with manuscript texts necessary, see B. M. Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Palaeography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); F. G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2d ed.; 1932; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon, 1951); H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

Kelber distinguishes sharply between oral compositions, which could be altered for each performance, and written compositions, which he describes as fixed, "frozen" entities. But in antiquity texts were much more subject to adaptation and outright change than is true of printed texts and the difference in fixity between oral and written compositions was not nearly as great as Kelber alleges. One could probably address the question of whether Kelber's emphasis on the fluidity of oral transmission does justice to the fact that orality can involve routinization, regularization, and a concern for a certain stability in the story being told, but here I will address his characterization of the fixity of ancient texts. I cannot here go into an in-depth discussion of ancient texts in general, so I will restrict myself to some immediately relevant data. These data I mention demonstrate two phenomena: (1) The free adaptation and modification of texts, and (2) the varying ways texts were copied, which included wide-ranging, deliberate changes in the texts.

The most immediate counter-indication against Kelber's view of ancient textuality is of course the significant re-shaping of Mark by the authors of Matthew and Luke, which is so well analyzed in modern redaction-critical and literary-critical studies that I do not need to elaborate it here in great detail.³³ For example, Matthew embodies about 90% of Mark and generally retains the Markan order of the material taken over from Mark, but this material is wedded with much additional material (the "Q" and "M" material), and is appropriated in a narrative with additional components producing a significantly different narrative plan (e.g., the "birth narrative" in Matthew 1-2, the resurrection appearances and "great commission" in Matthew 28). Moreover, Matthew exhibits frequent and well-known modification of the Markan material appropriated (cf. Mark 6:45-52/ Matt 14:22-33), and a considerably different cluster of thematic concerns (e.g., lessened negative portrayal of disciples, greater emphasis on Jesus as a teacher of specific rules of life as in 5:19-48 and 18:7-35, and a more positive emphasis on Peter as in 16:16-20, etc.).

The adaptation of Markan material in Luke is probably even more thorough. In Luke one finds only about 60% of Mark, and, as in Matthew, the Markan material is joined by a large body of "Q" material as well as a sizable amount of "special" Lukan material (e.g., Luke 1-2, the mission of the 70 in 10:1-20, parables in 15:8-32, the post-resurrection narratives in Luke 24, etc.). In addition, as in Matthew, the Markan material has often been modified in style, content,

33. See, e.g., J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); O. C. Edwards, *Luke's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), for examples of recent investigations of these evangelists.

and emphases, producing significantly different versions of the incidents and sayings taken over from Mark (e.g., the Lukan eschatological discourse in 21:5-38); and the material is submerged in an account that has a distinctive narrative shape (e.g., the "travel narrative" of 9:51-19:27, and the beginning and ending of Luke) as well as distinctive emphases and narrative devices (e.g., the chronological concerns in 2:1-2 and 3:1-2).

In brief, all these familiar modifications of Mark amount to significantly new renditions of the Markan pattern of material that are comparable in general to the adaptation of oral compositions that have been studied by Lord and others in oral cultures.³⁴ This hardly corresponds with Kelber's claim that in Mark "a particular rendition of Jesus' life and death is made 'safe,' fortified against oral decay, variability, amnesia, or floating" (p. 105). The free adaptation of Markan material in Matthew and Luke is much more like Kelber's description of the fluid nature of oral storytelling, in which items

can be dropped or developed, reshuffled into new scenes or transferred from one component part to another. . . Major components can be omitted or compressed, reinterpreted or inflated (p. 49).

Also, as studies of the use of the Q material in Matthew and Luke have shown, the authors apparently felt free to adapt their other written source similarly.

As another example of the way ancients often provide significantly new renditions of texts, we may note Tatian's Diatessaron, in which the material in the four canonical Gospels was woven creatively into a new continuous sequence producing an account of Jesus' ministry that was thereby markedly different from any one of the four sources.³⁵ Though the Diatessaron is the most well known ancient Gospel "harmony," indications are that this was not the first or only such literary creation.³⁶ The ancient Gospel harmonies show that the textual integrity of Mark and the other Gospels was not always important to at least some Christians, and that they felt free to draw upon the Gospels as sources to create their own compositions and renditions of the story of Jesus. This freedom can be demonstrated in the ancient handling of other texts as well, such as the radical

34. E.g., A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

35. For a survey of modern research on the Diatessaron, see, e.g., B. M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 25-36. For an indication that Tatianic-type harmonization texts of the Gospels continued to be produced after Tatian, see B. M. Metzger, *Chapters in the History of New Testament Textual Criticism* (NTTS 4; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 97-120.

36. See, e.g., J. N. Birdsall, "The New Testament Text," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 1.332.

abbreviation and modification of Jason of Cyrene's five-volume work by the author of *2 Maccabees*.³⁷

In addition to the ancient freedom to give new renditions of ancient texts, we must also reckon with the freedom some ancient copyists exercised in transmitting texts. Although NT textual criticism appears to be regarded by some as an arcane and uninteresting area, a better familiarity with the manuscript tradition would perhaps help NT scholars develop a better grasp of ancient textuality. For example, Kelber writes that with Mark

. . . a beginning has been made in the synoptic tradition for a manuscript mentality that deals with original forms, copies, and textual accuracy—all notions foreign to the oral medium (p. 105).

I must indicate, however, that the data on the early transmission of the NT texts shows that Kelber's description of "manuscript mentality" is also foreign to much of the ancient written medium as well.

Once the printing press was invented, to be sure, it was possible to see to it that a text was duplicated and transmitted in a fixed, exact form corresponding to the author's wishes alone. But in the ancient setting, where texts were transmitted by being copied by hand, the transmission often involved a considerable freedom in modifying the text being copied.³⁸ Modern research has shown that, while some copyists apparently practiced their craft with great care for exactness, many others made all sorts of changes:³⁹ stylistic modifications, frequent harmonization (especially harmonization of Mark with parallels in the other Synoptics), deletions (e.g., the so-called "Western non-interpolations" in Luke), insertions (e.g., the famous peri-

37. Opinion is divided as to the ways the author of *2 Maccabees* may have treated Jason's larger work. The author certainly abbreviated it, and may have embellished and elaborated it at some points. In any case, *2 Maccabees* is a wholly new 'rendition' of the material in Jason's history. See, e.g., W. H. Brownlee, "Maccabees, Books of," *IDS* 3.206-10; H. A. Attridge, "Historiography," in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (ed. M. E. Stone; CRINT 2.2; Assen: Van Gorcum/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 176-83.

38. For a helpful introduction to ancient textual variation in the earliest Christian period, see Birdsall, "New Testament Text," 336-45.

39. See, e.g., E. C. Colwell, *Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (NTTS 9; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 106-24, for an introduction to scribal habits. For an extended comparison of scribal differences in early NT papyri, see G. D. Fee, "P75, P66, and Origen: The Myth of Early Textual Recension in Alexandria," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 19-45. J. R. Royse, "Scribal Tendencies in the Transmission of the Text of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (ed. B. D. Ehrman and M. W. Holmes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 239-52, is a good overview.

cope of the adulteress added after John 7:53, or 7:36 or 21:25 or after Luke 21:38), and modifications of a doctrinal nature (e.g., the several variations in Mark 3:21 and 13:32).⁴⁰

Perhaps the most extensive example of the somewhat free textual transmission of the NT is the so-called Western text of Acts, which is nearly one-tenth longer than the more familiar Alexandrian text.⁴¹ In particular, E. J. Epp has called for more attention to the modification of the NT text of a thematic nature exhibited in the western text of Acts.⁴²

But there is, of course, a major example of the somewhat fluid nature of ancient textuality that we can note directly pertaining to Mark: the several scribally-supplied endings to Mark, all of which are significant modifications of the shape of the Markan narrative.⁴³ These scribal innovations in the ending of Mark show how free some ancient Christians felt to modify even those texts deemed to have some sort of authority; and the re-shaping of the Markan ending is only the most well-known example of the fluidity of ancient texts that goes against Kelber's picture of textual fixity in the Synoptic tradition. We must beware of assuming that the concern for exactness characteristic of the printed text or attributed to the Massoretic copying of the Hebrew Bible was shared by ancients in general. That was manifestly not the case.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

Considered as the earliest written narrative of Jesus' ministry, the Gospel of Mark was of course a major event in the literary history of early Christianity and a major step in the transmission of the Jesus

40. On, e.g., scribal purposes in Codex W, see L. W. Hurtado, *Text-Critical Methodology and the Pre-Caesarean Text* (SD 43; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981). For a recent study of doctrinally-motivated scribal changes, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

41. For an introduction, see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971) 259-72.

42. E. J. Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts* (SNTSMS 3; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

43. For a review of the variations, see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 122-26. See also J. L. Magness, *Sense and Absence: Structure and Suspension in the Ending of Mark's Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). For an innovative study of the "long ending" to Mark, see P. A. Mirecki, "Mark 16:9-20: Composition, Tradition and Redaction," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1986).

44. See also the discussion of textual fluidity in Rabbinic texts by Philip S. Alexander, "Orality in Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism at the Turn of the Eras," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, esp. 181-82.

tradition. Kelber is correct to point to the importance of Mark in the gradual "textualizing" of the Jesus tradition, though he has oversimplified Mark's role in that process. His thesis rests upon an unreliable representation of orality and textuality in Mark's Greco-Roman setting. Though we can be grateful to Kelber for highlighting among NT scholars the categories of "orality" and "textuality," unfortunately his attempt to employ these categories is not persuasive.

Kelber's portrayal of Greco-Roman orality and textuality suffers from several errors. He gives an incorrect picture of the cultural setting of early Christianity by likening it to oral cultures with little or no exposure to literacy. He separates oral performance from texts by portraying the ancient writing and reading of texts in modern terms. Likewise, he exaggerates ancient textual fixity because he apparently has an inadequate grasp of ancient uses of texts and of manuscript copying.

Because his view of Mark as a revolutionary text that was intended to overturn previous Christian structures and thought rests so heavily upon this picture of ancient orality and textuality, this too much be regarded as seriously called into question. In place of Kelber's view of Mark, the following seems more likely correct. Mark emerged in a cultural setting very familiar with, and appreciative of, both oral and written media, a setting in which oral and written media had influenced each other for centuries. Mark itself shows this cross-influence of oral and written media, and both in individual units and in its larger narrative framework is a text that has direct links with the oral preaching and teaching of the pre-Markan period, though the text is also the product of a dedicated early Christian writer.

Mark is not the single revolutionary document that created "textuality" in early Christianity. It was a step in a line of developments, many of the crucial ones well beyond the lifetime of the author and beyond the horizon of his intentions. The sort of fixity in the Jesus tradition Kelber portrays in fact took a few centuries. The standardization and, ultimately, the canonization of the textual pictures of Jesus in the Gospels was part of a process of social development in early Christianity that involved many factors, and Kelber's attribution of key responsibility to Mark must be regarded as incorrect.