

IS OUR READING THE BIBLE THE SAME AS
THE ORIGINAL AUDIENCE'S HEARING IT?
A CASE STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

ROBERT H. STEIN*

In a previous paper read at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society entitled "The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics"¹ I sought to demonstrate the importance of maintaining that it is the author who determines the meaning of a text. I want to build on some of the implications of an author-oriented approach to hermeneutics and have chosen as the topic of this paper, "Is Our Reading the Bible the Same as the Original Audience's Hearing It?" The address is divided into two parts. The first is entitled "The Intended Readers of Mark" and the second is entitled "Consequences" or if we want a more detailed, Germanic-like title "Consequences in the Goal of Interpretation as a Result of Understanding Mark's Readers."

I. THE INTENDED READERS OF MARK

In trying to understand the meaning of a text it is important to know something about the readers addressed by the author, that is, the intended readers.² The more that we know about these readers the more likely it is that we shall be able to understand the willed meaning of the author. Since I have been working a great deal on the Gospel of Mark, permit me to deal specifically with this book of the Bible. I believe, however, that what is true with respect to Mark is also true with respect to other biblical books as well, although some of the OT books raise additional issues and problems. To whom did Mark write his Gospel? Whom did he envision as his intended audience? Since Mark wanted his readers to understand what he was writing, he used a shared set of words or symbols and a shared grammatical syntax. If we

* Robert H. Stein is professor of New Testament interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280. The following article was delivered as an address at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Toronto, Canada at its November 2002 meeting. Because of the thesis of the address, the present article was left in its original form in order to serve as an example of the difference between material that is written in order to be heard from that which is written in order to be read silently. It is obvious that the content of the present article was addressed to "hearers," whereas the footnotes were written for those who would read the article silently.

¹ The paper is found in *JETS* 44 (2001) 451–66.

² For the sake of simplicity we shall not distinguish between such terms as "implied reader," "competent reader," "real reader," "ideal reader," "intended reader," etc. We shall define the term "reader" in this paper as "the intended reader that the biblical author had in mind."

therefore learn the meaning of these symbols and the grammatical syntax the author shared with his intended readers, we can then understand how his readers would have understood his Gospel. (To be more accurate, let me reword this last sentence as follows: “If we therefore learn the meaning of these symbols and the grammatical syntax, we can then understand how Mark’s readers *should* have understood his Gospel.”)³

Ascertaining the intended audience of Mark, as I understand it, does not involve some hypothetical sociological model or reconstruction of the time and situation in which and for which Mark wrote.⁴ Rather it involves what the Gospel itself reveals with respect to the make-up of Mark’s intended readership. We are thus not seeking to build upon a hypothetical reconstruction of the situation of Mark but rather to understand what the text that Mark has given us reveals concerning his intended audience. The following characteristics may be inferred regarding Mark’s intended audience.

1. *A Greek-speaking audience.* We can even be more specific—Mark’s audience was a *koine* first-century Greek-speaking audience. This is not a profound insight, since the Gospel was written in Greek, but it is nevertheless important. This understanding indicates right away that basing arguments on the root meanings of English words is ludicrous. To ask, “What did Mark, who wrote many centuries before there ever was an English language, mean by a particular English word?” is anachronistic, to say the least. Yet even people who should know better still base various arguments on the root meanings of the English words used to translate the biblical texts.

To “hear” the Gospel of Mark one must understand the Greek language used by the Evangelist. To understand what Mark means by the Greek terms and grammatical syntax he uses requires us to know the language used by Mark. This is why we require and teach Greek (and Hebrew) to those who would be ministers of the gospel. Readers of the NIV, NASB, NLT, RSV, NRSV, etc. are not really seeking to understand what Mark meant as they read his Gospel in these translations. They are rather seeking to understand what the translators mean. This is evident by the fact that it makes no sense at all to ask such questions as, “What does Mark mean by this English word or by this English grammatical construction?” The person using a translation of Mark, rather than the Greek text, will always be one step removed from the meaning of the evangelist. This may not pose a problem for a reader-oriented hermeneutic, but it does for an author-oriented one. If we want to have direct access to the meaning of the biblical writers, we must know the biblical languages. In a generation that likes fast food and overnight short-cuts to weight loss, the discipline of learning the biblical languages does not come easily. But would you want to study French literature from someone who

³ It is obvious that the intended audience did not always understand correctly the meaning of the author. This is seen clearly in 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians. The misunderstanding of Paul’s intended audience required 2 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians in which the apostle sought to correct this misunderstanding.

⁴ See, for example, Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 77–175.

could not read French? Do we want our people to hear the sacred Scriptures taught each Sunday by those who know the Scriptures only through translation? In Hebrews 11 the suffering of God's people involves such things as: mocking, scourging, torture, stoning, being sawn in two, imprisonment, chains, and death. If the only suffering ministers of the gospel will have to experience is that of learning the biblical languages, our suffering will be remarkably light.⁵

2 and 3. *They did not know Aramaic and Hebrew and they were unfamiliar with certain Jewish customs.* In at least eight places in Mark we find Aramaic or Hebrew expressions that the evangelist translated into Greek (3:17; 5:41; 7:34; 9:43; 10:46; 14:36; 15:22, 34) in order that his readers could understand them. As a result it is clear that they did not know these two Semitic languages. That his readers did not understand certain Jewish customs and traditions is evident from Mark 7:3–5 where Mark explains to his readers

For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and vessels of bronze.

This explanation by Mark makes it clear that a large portion of his readers were Gentiles unfamiliar with various Jewish rules concerning ritual purity. In contrast, it is interesting to note that Matthew seems to assume that his readers would be familiar with these Jewish customs, so he omits Mark's explanation of them found in 7:3–5, and he also provides no explanation for the Jewish customs and practices he mentions in Matt 23:16–26. Elsewhere Mark translates Jewish coinage into Roman coinage (12:42), indicating that his readers were not familiar with Jewish currency. He also explains various Jewish religious festivals in 14:12 and 15:42. Knowing that Mark's readers did not know Hebrew, Aramaic, or various Jewish practices alone should have been sufficient to prevent Willi Marxsen from arguing that Mark wrote his Gospel to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem shortly before A.D. 70 urging them to flee to Galilee.⁶

⁵ Permit me to give a hypothetical example. Let us assume that as a young man you went on a mission trip to Poland during the time when the cold war was still a reality. During this time you fell in love with a young woman, and although she could not speak English and you could not speak Polish, your love blossomed. Despite all your efforts, however, you were unable to obtain a visa for her to come back with you to the United States. When you returned, during the time of seeking a visa for your beloved through diplomatic means, you were only able to communicate by letter. She wrote you in Polish, and you wrote her in English. Let me ask you a question. How long would you be content to go to a translator and have him translate the letters you received from your beloved? How long would it be before you learned Polish so that you could read these precious letters yourself? We teach the biblical languages in order that we can read the Bible, God's love letters to us, directly and without an intermediary.

⁶ Willi Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959). The English translation appears as *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on Redaction History of the Gospel* (trans. James Boyce; Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

4. *Possessed at least a basic knowledge of the Old Testament.* Where Mark's mostly Gentile readers obtained this knowledge is not certain, but it is quite possible that one factor involved their pre-Christian training in the synagogue either as proselytes to Judaism or as God-fearers. The latter were Gentiles attracted to Judaism who attended the synagogue but never fully converted to Judaism. These ultimately proved a most fruitful soil for the preaching of the Gospel (cf. Acts 13:13–51, note esp. vv. 16, 26, 43, 48).⁷ By their attendance in the synagogues, such proselytes and God-fearers would have become familiar with the OT. In addition the reading of the OT in Christian worship would bring them even greater familiarity with the OT scriptures.

A basic knowledge of the OT is assumed in the opening verses of the Gospel. After his introductory statement, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," Mark writes, "Just as it is written in Isaiah the prophet. . . ." Then he quotes a combination of prophecies from Isaiah, Malachi, and Exodus. What is important for us to note is that Mark felt no need to explain to his readers who Isaiah was. In Mark seven he makes a distinction between the "traditions of men" and the commandment from God (cf. 12:28–34) and quotes again from Isaiah and from Moses using their names without explanation (7:6–13). In 9:4 he states that Elijah and Moses appear to Jesus at the Transfiguration and makes no attempt to explain who they are (cf. also 12:19). In 9:11 he tells how the disciples asked Jesus, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" and assumes that his readers will understand both the question and Jesus' reply.

Mark also assumes his readers will understand: who David was (2:25–26; 12:35–37) and what the coming kingdom of David entails (11:10); what the "Passover" was (14:1, 12); that a quotation following the words "it is written" comes from the OT (1:2; 7:6; 9:12; 11:17; 12:19; 14:21, 27); what the term "scripture" refers to (12:10–11); who Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were (12:26); and that the description of John the Baptist's clothing in 1:6 ("Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist . . .") matched that of Elijah in 2 Kgs 1:8. The fact that he does not explain these to his readers, whereas in 7:3–5 he does explain the post-OT Jewish rituals of washing, indicates that he assumed these OT materials required no explanation. His readers must therefore have possessed a fairly extensive knowledge of the OT.

5. *Possessed a knowledge of the Jesus traditions.* How detailed their knowledge of the gospel traditions was is not certain, but that Mark's readers possessed at least a basic understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus is evident from a number of considerations. For one, at the beginning of the Gospel when he introduces John the Baptist, he does not explain to his readers who John the Baptist was. He assumes that John and his mission were familiar to them. Whereas the Gospel of John introduces the story of

⁷ See S. McKnight, "Proselytism and Godfearers," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 846–47.

John the Baptist as follows: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John (1:6)," Mark simply tells his readers that "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4). Mark apparently thought that his readers would be sufficiently familiar with the Jesus traditions that they knew who John the Baptist was and the role he played in the gospel story. One should note in contrast how Mark explains who Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea were in 15:41 and 43. Their roles in the gospel traditions were not as important as that of John the Baptist, and thus Mark did not assume that his readers were familiar with them.

In 6:1 Mark tells the story of how Jesus came to his own town and was met there with unbelief. He does not, however, name Jesus' hometown. He apparently expects his readers to know that it was Nazareth. Whether this was to be inferred from the use of the title "Jesus of Nazareth" in 1:9 and 24 or whether Mark is assuming that they knew Jesus came from Nazareth cannot be determined, however, with certainty. The way Mark refers to various geographical designations such as Capernaum (1:21; 2:2; etc.) and Bethsaida (8:22) and the way in which a religious group such as the Pharisees (2:16, 18, and 23) and individuals such as Pontius Pilate (15:1) are introduced without explanation suggest that the readers were familiar with their roles in the gospel story.

The use of τὸν λόγον or "the word" in 1:45; 2:2; 4:33 and other places seems to suggest that Mark's readers were familiar with the technical use of this term for "the gospel." The heavy Markan emphasis on Jesus as a teacher and on his teaching ministry suggests that his readers were familiar with these teachings. We should note that the nouns "teacher" and "teachings" and the verb "to teach" occur 34 times in Mark and only 29 times in Matthew. Yet Matthew is approximately 66% longer than Mark, so that, if the emphasis in Matthew were comparable to that of Mark, one would expect to find these terms used in Matthew, not 29 times, but 56 times. On the other hand, Mark contains considerably less teaching material than Matthew. It is difficult to explain why Mark would place so much emphasis in his editorial work on Jesus' teaching ministry and not include more teaching material in his Gospel, unless he assumed that his readers were already familiar with these teachings.

A number of other examples can be found in Mark where it appears that the evangelist assumes knowledge of the gospel traditions by his readers. In Mark 1:8 the evangelist quotes the words of John the Baptist, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Yet nowhere in Mark does he explain what this expression means. Does this suggest that Mark expected his readers to understand what the "baptism of the Spirit" meant? In 1:14 Mark states rather abruptly, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee. . . ." This seems to assume that his readers knew about the arrest and martyrdom of John the Baptist.

Finally, and this will lead to the second part of the address, I want to point out that Mark's intended readers were not really readers, as we understand the word. The intended readers of the Gospel of Mark envisioned by the evangelist were not readers at all. They were hearers.

6. *Hearers of the Gospel.* How should we envision the original occasion of the reading of Mark? Let's assume that the Gospel was written to and for the church in Rome. Actually, we do not need to know exactly to whom the letter was written, but for the sake of illustration we shall use the traditional understanding that Mark wrote this Gospel for the church in Rome. It is difficult to imagine that someone would stand up in the congregation and say, "Would you please take the scroll of Mark found in the pew rack and turn with me twelve cubits into the scroll or about forty turns of the scroll to the right. There we read a third of the way down the column, the following. . . ."⁸

Please excuse my somewhat frivolous example, but I want to emphasize the point upon which I shall build the second part of the paper, which is entitled "Consequences in the Goal of Interpretation as a Result of Understanding Mark's Intended Readers." There will be some important differences in how we interpret Mark if we believe that the author wrote his Gospel with the thought that his "readers" would be hearing it read to them rather than that they would be reading the scroll for themselves. Before we discuss this, however, let me seek to establish more fully my thesis that Mark's intended "readers" were in reality hearers of the Gospel. In biblical times books and letters were written to be read out loud. Bernard M. W. Knox states, ". . . it [is] perfectly clear that the normal way to read a literary text . . . was out loud, whether before an audience, in the company of friends or alone."⁹ What was true of literary texts seems to have been true in general of non-literary texts as well. Paul Achtemeier comments, "It is apparent that the general—indeed, from all evidence, the exclusive—practice was to read aloud."¹⁰ Even private reading was generally performed out loud. Herodotus (I.48) (ca. 450 B.C.) refers to Croesus opening scrolls from the Delphi oracle, reading what was written in them, and upon "hearing" them accepting them as true. It is evident that Herodotus assumed that Croesus read the scrolls out loud. Martial (ca. A.D. 85) states that he did not write his *Epigrams* for "vacant ears" (11.3.2). Seneca (ca. A.D. 50) describes a contemporary writer as "writing . . . for the mind rather than for the ear" (*Ep. Mor.* 100.3), and Lucian (ca. A.D. 170) writes of "read[ing] aloud with great fluency, keeping your eyes in advance of your lips."¹¹ "Reading silently was not . . . impossible (though the degree of silence is still open to debate): but it not only was unusual, it was accounted an imperfect and defective method of reading."¹² The practice of reading out loud was furthermore not merely

⁸ Although Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (trans. John Bowden; Harrisburg: Trinity International, 2000) 122, has sought to argue that Mark was originally written as a codex, the present writer is unconvinced.

⁹ "Silent Reading in Antiquity," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 9 (1968) 421, cf. p. 427.

¹⁰ Paul J. Achtemeier, "Omne verbum sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (1990) 15; cf. Josef Balogh, "'Voces Paginarum.' Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens," *Philologus* 82 (1927) 88–109.

¹¹ *Adversus Indoctum* (*The Ignorant Book Collector*) 2. Cf. Ovid *Heroides* XXI.1–2 and XVIII.19–20.

¹² G. L. Hendrickson, "Ancient Reading," *Classical Journal* 25 (1929) 192; Balogh, *Voces Paginarum* 220. Cf. Plutarch, *Life of Brutus* 5.

a Greek or Roman practice, but a rabbinical one as well.¹³ Compare 2 Macc 15:39 where we read, "For just as it is harmful to drink wine alone, or, again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one's enjoyment, so also the style of the story delights the ears of those who read the work (author's italics, RSV)."

It was not only the finished product that was read out loud. In the act of writing, the content was generally spoken out loud. This is most evident if an amanuensis, or secretary, was used.¹⁴ But even if an author personally wrote his own work, he generally spoke it out loud to himself. As Achtemeier writes, "In the last analysis, dictation was the only means of writing; it was only a question of whether one dictated to another or one's self."¹⁵

The practice just described seems also to have been the practice of the NT writers. The term "read" (or ἀναγινώσκειν) is generally used in the NT in the sense of reading aloud, just as the English use of the term "read" can mean to read aloud. It is used in the sense of publicly reading out loud in Acts 13:15. There we find, "After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them [i.e. Paul and his company] saying, 'Brethren, if you have word of exhortation for the people, say it.'" Now it is evident that "the reading of the law and the prophets" refers here to the public reading aloud of the Scriptures in the synagogue. In Acts 15:31 the text states, "and when they read it [i.e. the letter containing the Jerusalem decree found in verses 23–29] they rejoiced at the exhortation." It is clear that the passage refers to this letter being read aloud.

In 1 Thess 5:27 Paul tells the church that "this letter [was to be] read (ἀναγνώσθηνα) to all the brethren." The fact that this letter is addressed to "the church of the Thessalonians" (1:1) and that the "you" referred to in 1:2, 3, 4, and following is plural, that is, a southern "you all," indicates that Paul intended that his letter was to be read aloud to the entire congregation. In 5:27 Paul is probably commanding that this letter be read aloud to those who were not present at its original reading. The letter to the Colossians was also intended by Paul to be read aloud to the "saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colosse" (1:2), as the plural "you" in 1:3, 4, 5, etc. indicates. In 4:16 Paul furthermore commands, "And when this letter has been read among you [it should be noted that the 'you' is plural], have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea." These, and the other letters of the NT, were meant to be read out loud. If, as I assume, Paul was a careful writer, he would therefore have penned these letters more for his readers' ears than for their eyes. Other biblical references which refer to "reading" that must involve "reading aloud" because of the plural audience envisioned are found in 2 Cor 1:13; Eph 3:4; Acts 13:27;

¹³ Birger Geerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1961) 164–65.

¹⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen: 1982) 95; Achtemeier, "Omne verbum sonat" 12–13.

¹⁵ Achtemeier, "Omne verbum sonat" 15; cf. Balogh, *Voces Paginarum* 212–19; John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 56.

15:21; 2 Cor 3:14–15; 1 Tim 4:13; and in Luke 4:16 where Jesus read aloud from the Book of Isaiah.

An even more revealing passage is found in Rev 1:3. Here the biblical author pronounces the following blessing: “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.” Here the reader of the book is referred to and the term ἀναγινώσκειν is used and is correctly translated “reads aloud.” The act of reading the book envisions hearers, and the blessing pronounced in the verse is upon both reader and those hearing the reading, if they keep the teachings found in the book (cf. Rev 22:18).

The Bible itself contains clear evidence that even personal reading was done out loud. In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, we read that the angel of the Lord appeared to Philip and told him to go to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. After the Spirit led Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, the meeting is described in Acts 8:30 as follows. “So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’” From this it is evident that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading to himself out loud.

It is interesting to note that when John the Baptist was born and the relatives and friends wanted to name him “Zechariah,” Elizabeth said, “Not so, he shall be called John.” Since this was so unusual, they asked Zechariah who was, as you might remember, mute. We then read in Luke 1:63, “And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, ‘His name is John (RSV).’” The Greek text, however, reads, “And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, *saying*, ‘His name is John.’” As a result some scholars have suggested that this means that he spoke out loud what he was writing. Yet it must be acknowledged that the expression “wrote, saying” may be a Hebraism meaning “wrote” as in 2 Kgs 6:10, and Luke 1:64 suggests this as well. Another possible example from Luke is found in 16:29. There Jesus responds to the request of the rich man to send Lazarus from the dead to tell his brothers of their need to repent, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” It is uncertain, however, if this refers to hearing Moses and the prophets read in the synagogue¹⁶ or whether “hear” means to “heed.”

The reading aloud of written materials seems to have been the practice in the following centuries as well. Augustine (toward the end of the fourth century) in his *Confessions* 6.3 refers to his hero, Ambrose’s, unusual practice of reading silently, and suggests that he may have done this to preserve his rather fragile voice. And the Benedictine Rule, Regulation 48, which was written around the middle of the sixth century, gives instruction that during the rest period, when lying on your bed, you should out of courtesy to your neighbor read in complete silence, that is, not out loud in the usual manner.¹⁷ Even today the auditory nature of reading is still conveyed by the

¹⁶ So I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 639.

¹⁷ Other examples can also be found involving reading silently. See A. Gawrilow, “Lautes und stilles Lesen im Altertum,” *Acta antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 33 (1990–92) 111–15; Michael Slusser, “Reading Silently in Antiquity,” *JBL* 11 (1992) 499; Frank D. Gilliard, “More Silent Reading in Antiquity: *Non Omne Verbum Sonabat*,” *JBL* 112 (1993) 689–94. The latter argues

way we occasionally describe our reading texts. We sometimes say that a particular book or poem “spoke to me” or refer to written instructions “telling us,” rather than “indicating to us” or we state that a newspaper “says” that. . . .¹⁸

Several other considerations also indicate that the NT writers anticipated that their works would be read aloud to their intended readers. One involves the fact that only a small percentage of people could read in ancient times. Arriving at exact statistics as to how many people could read in biblical times is very difficult. The figures that most often come up are that about 5–10%, at most perhaps 10–15%, of the population in Greek and Roman society could read.¹⁹ The percentage of Christians who could read in the first century was probably somewhere between 3–10%.²⁰ With respect to the Jewish population the estimated percentages range as low as 3%.²¹ Thus any biblical writer would have realized that the vast majority of his “readers” would in fact not be able to read their works at all but would need to hear them read to them.

Another fact that must be considered is that ancient Greek texts such as Mark consisted of a string of unbroken capital letters. There were no breaks between words, sentences, or even paragraphs. The Gospel of Mark was originally a continuous collection of capital letters. It was in effect one huge, single word! Letters were separated from one another only when Mark came to the end of individual columns of letters. The separation of words at the end of the column, however, was not due to the desire to separate words but to the lack of space. The easiest way for a reader to decipher such a written text was by sounding out the various syllables in this unbroken collection of letters.²² Thus texts were normally read out loud even in private.

It is my thesis that the NT writers understood their intended audience not so much as individual readers but as a corporate audience of hearers. Even though both Luke and Acts are addressed to Theophilus, the length of these two works indicates that it was intended for a much larger audience than simply one person. Furthermore, the NT writers anticipated that the

that “we should be mindful that the predominance of orality does not mean exclusivity, either in writing or in reading” (694).

¹⁸ Eugene S. McCartney, “Note on Reading and Praying Audibly,” *Classical Philology* 43 (1948) 186.

¹⁹ William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 272, 328–30, suggests 5–10%. Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001) 23–36, suggests 10–15%. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 4, suggests that it never exceeded 15–20% of the population. Harris’s figures seem more likely.

²⁰ Gamble, *Books and Readers* 5. Could Mark’s predilection toward redundancy be explained as due to his envisioning an oral audience for his Gospel? See Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 339–41 and Albert B. Lord, “Characteristics of Orality,” *Oral Tradition* 2/1 (1987) 57–58.

²¹ Hezser, *Jewish Literacy* 35. Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (The Biblical Seminar 69; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) argues that reading (and writing) among Jews was more common, but he does not suggest what the percentage of those who could read might have been.

²² Gamble, *Books and Readers* 203–4.

members of this corporate audience would not have individual copies of their works before them, but that someone would read out loud what they had written for their intended readers. Thus the intended readers of the NT were not readers in the traditional sense at all. They were hearers who would not read this Gospel themselves but rather hear it read to them by others. The main sense involved was not their eyes but their ears, and the experience was not a visual one but an auditory one.

This rather simple insight seems to go unrecognized by most interpreters. Recently a collection of essays appeared entitled *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*.²³ It is apparent, however, that “hearing” is understood not in the sense of “hearing something read out loud” but metaphorically for “heeding” or “understanding.” This is clear from the introductory article that is entitled “The Challenge of Hearing the New Testament.” Virtually nothing in this article, or in the entire volume, is concerned, however, with how one’s hermeneutical understanding is affected if the original readers were in fact not reading the text but hearing it read to them. Yet elsewhere Harry Y. Gamble argues, “. . . no ancient text is now read as it was intended to be unless it is also heard, that is, read aloud.”²⁴ How does one come to understand what Mozart was seeking to convey in one of his symphonies? Is it by reading a printed score of his work or by hearing the symphony played? For those of you who still remember listening to an old radio drama, let me ask you a question. In order to understand a radio drama, is it better to read a printed script of the program or to listen to it on tape? Or to use a more biblical analogy, is a better scenario for understanding the Gospel of Mark hearing a book-tape of it with one’s eyes closed or reading it in your study surrounded by commentaries, lexicons, Bible dictionaries, and Greek grammars?

Let us proceed, however, to the second and final point of my paper.

II. CONSEQUENCES IN THE GOAL OF INTERPRETATION AS A RESULT OF UNDERSTANDING MARK’S INTENDED READERS

Let me in this section suggest several simple consequences resulting from our understanding that Mark’s intended readers were actually hearers of the Gospel.

²³ Edited by Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). Cf. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener’s Guide* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2002) in which the focus is not on how the original readers should have understood Mark as it was being read to them (an author-oriented approach to meaning) but how modern-day readers should understand/hear the Gospel of Mark as they silently read it (a reader-oriented approach to meaning).

²⁴ Gamble, *Books and Readers* 204. Cf. John D. Harvey, “Orality and Its implications for Biblical Studies: Recapturing an Ancient Paradigm,” *JETS* 45 (2002) 99, who states that “most biblical scholars continue to examine the NT documents using presuppositions that apply more to nineteenth and twentieth-century literary/print culture than to the culture in which those documents were originally produced.”

1. *Not learned biblical scholars.* Mark did not envision his intended readers as poring over this text in a study in the presence of all sorts of scholarly tools. They had before them no Septuagintal or Masoretic texts of the OT, no Concordances, Lexicons, or Greek Grammars. The hearers were not learned biblical scholars. They were essentially lay people who met together as believers and heard this Gospel read to them.

2. *Knowledge of Greek, the Old Testament, and a more compatible world view.* The readers of Mark, however, brought with them to the hearing of this text various abilities and aids. One of the abilities they brought with them was their knowledge of the Greek language. The reason why we use Greek Lexicons and Grammars is because we do not possess their knowledge of Greek, and we need these tools. But they did not, for the language of the Gospel was their native tongue. They also brought with them a knowledge of the OT, and from what we learn from the Gospel itself, it was fairly substantial. And they also brought to the hearing of the Gospel a knowledge of the gospel traditions, and this too appears to have been more extensive than we are sometimes accustomed to think.

Other, less quantifiable “aids” that Mark’s intended readers brought to their hearing of the Gospel include a world view that was far closer to that of the evangelist than that of twenty-first century readers. It is also quite possible that they may have been the recipients of first-hand eyewitness reports of the gospel events and teachings. If we accept the tradition that the Gospel was written for the church in Rome to those who had heard the apostle Peter, we can assume this. However, this cannot be deduced from the contents of the Gospel of Mark itself. (Of course, if we approach the Gospels with a historical-critical presupposition that miracles cannot happen, then eyewitness reports of the gospel miracles could not have occurred.) Another “aid” that Mark’s readers possessed was the person who brought the Gospel to them. That person knew the content of the work and may very well have practiced reading the Gospel aloud before he read it publicly to the intended readers. It is quite likely that Mark had given him not only the papyrus scroll containing his Gospel but various instructions as well. In this respect it is probable that the bearers of Paul’s various letters brought with them, not only the letters themselves, but an understanding of the content of those letters from the apostle. Thus such messengers would have been able to provide a “commentary” and answer questions that the hearers might have had.²⁵

3. *First-time hearers.* Another important implication that flows out of the presupposition that Mark thought of his “readers” as “hearers” having

²⁵ Whereas the present readers of Rev 13:18 are uncertain as to the meaning of the number “666” and what “baptism for the dead” means in 1 Cor 15:29, the original readers, if they did not understand, had available the bearer of the letter, who could explain this to them.

his Gospel read to them, is that he wrote clearly enough that his hearers would be able to understand what he said *as the Gospel was being read to them*. Once we assume that the original audience Mark consciously had in mind was a hearing audience, this raises serious questions as to how subtle, convoluted, and detailed his willed meaning could have been. I have serious reservations when I read someone's thesis that the entire Gospel of Mark was composed as a large chiasmus containing elements A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, J', I', H', G', F', E', D', C', B', and A'.²⁶ How would anyone hearing the Gospel of Mark have been able to follow such an intricate and complicated outline? Shouldn't the fact that for over nineteen centuries no one saw such a chiasmus in Mark, shouldn't this caution us from positing such a hypothesis?²⁷ "[Mark] had to be structured so that a listening audience could follow it."²⁸ Thus Mark, and even Paul's letters, should be interpreted in light of the ability of their hearing audiences to process the information being read to them, *as it was being read*.

If Mark wrote his Gospel to lay people who would hear it read to them, shouldn't this also make us cautious about seeing subtle rabbinical or OT allusions in it? I want to suggest that if Mark intended his hearers to see in a passage of his Gospel an allusion to the OT, then he most probably would have given clear and fairly transparent terminological indications of such an allusion. There was no need for him to be subtle. On the contrary, there was every reason to be clear and explicit. Scholars often find very subtle OT allusions in Mark. Then they sheepishly admit that the alleged references in the Bible used by Mark's hearers, the LXX, employ different terms than Mark does to describe this. Or they admit that the order of the alleged parallels is different in Mark than in the LXX, or they claim that you must combine two different OT passages together to see the allusion, etc. If Mark consciously wrote to an audience that he knew would hear the Gospel read to them, I doubt that any intended OT, Roman, or rabbinical allusion would have been overly subtle. We must remember that, if Mark's hearers did not immediately understand such an allusion, if they had to reflect on the alleged OT parallels for any length of time, if they had to piece together subtle elements of various prophecies or passages, they would have lost Mark's intended meaning. We have to keep in mind that the Gospel was continuously being read to them. The author of the Gospel of Mark did not break down his work into a series of separate lectionaries. On the contrary, he

²⁶ M. Philip Scott, "CHIASTIC STRUCTURE: A Key to the Interpretation of Mark's Gospel," *BTB* 15 (1985) 17–26. The present writer must confess that on reading and rereading this article, even with seeing the chiasmic outline before him and trying to follow it, he was not able to see such a structure in Mark. How would a hearer of Mark for the first time be able to perceive such a structure? For another attempt to see a large chiasmic structure in Mark, see R. Lafontaine and P. M. Beernaert, "Essai sur la structure du Marc 8.27–10.13," *RSR* 57 (1969) 543–61.

²⁷ This sentence reveals the difference in writing when the author thinks that what he has written is going to be read aloud. If I wrote the sentence expecting that its primary audience would be a "reading" rather than a hearing audience, that is, if it were written as a journal article, I would not have repeated the second "shouldn't this."

²⁸ Joanna Dewey, "Oral Methods of Structuring Narrative in Mark," *Int* 43 (1989) 33.

wrote a complete Gospel, that, as we pointed out, consisted of a single, unbroken word. The reader did not stop after every verse for a time of meditation. If a hearer needed to reflect at length over an alleged allusion, he would miss what followed, for the Gospel continued to be read! Thus to understand what was being read he had to focus all his attention on the continuous reading of the text. Mark knew this and wrote accordingly.

The reading of the Scriptures in church provides us with a reasonably good analogy. If we do not follow the reading of the Gospel of Mark in our own Bibles but simply listen to it being read, all our attention must be devoted to listening to and trying to understand the text being read. There is little time to reflect on possible OT allusions. If we do, we will lose the main point that the evangelist sought to convey as the text is being read. We must also remember that Mark's intended hearers had never heard his Gospel read before. They were experiencing the hearing of the Gospel for the first time. Thus they had even less opportunity to reflect on something that was not directly stated or alluded to in the text.

Now I have no problem with the idea that Mark may have believed that his Gospel would be reread and perhaps reread again and again! He may even have stated something in his Gospel that he did not think his hearers would have understood in their first hearing of the Gospel. However, the only audience that the evangelist was sure of, the only audience he could count on with certainty, was the original recipients of the Gospel who would hear it read to them for the first time. Thus the willed meaning of the evangelist in its most essential form would be that which he directed to the original hearers of his Gospel, and he shaped his intended meaning so that this original audience would understand the meaning he willed. Thus any OT or other allusion would have had to be reasonably clear, not subtle; fairly obvious, not allusive; on the surface, not buried in some subsurface level.

4. *Clues.* If Mark visualized the recipients of his Gospel as an audience of hearers, he would have provided various clues for them in order to understand the Gospel. These are not necessarily different from the clues that writers today provide for their readers, but I believe that they would be more numerous and obvious and more auditory than visible. Permit me to suggest briefly that these might involve one of the following elements.

a. *Repetition.* Let me use Matthew here as an example. The Gospel of Matthew is constructed around the alternating pattern of narratives and blocks of teaching material. For example, in chapters 1–4 we have a block of narrative, in 5–7 teaching, in 8–9 narrative, in 10 teaching, in 11–12 narrative, in 13 teaching, in 14–17 narrative, in 18 teaching, in 19–22 narrative, in 23–25 teaching, and in 26–28 narrative. The blocks of teaching material are all introduced by the participle, λέγων or “saying” (5:2; 10:5; 13:3; 23:2), except once where the verbal form εἶπεν or “he said” is used (18:3). And without exception they conclude with καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλετο ὁ Ἰησοῦς or, “And it came to pass when Jesus finished. . . .” The sentence reads in the first teaching block in 7:28, “And it came to pass when Jesus finished these

words. . .” In the second block in 11:1 it reads, “And it came to pass when Jesus finished commanding his disciples. . .” In the third block in 13:53 it reads, “And it came to pass when Jesus finished these parables. . .” In the fourth block in 19:1 it reads, “And it came to pass when Jesus finished these words. . .” And in the fifth and final block in 26:1 it reads, “And it came to pass when Jesus finished all these words. . .” Such repetition provided clues for Matthew’s hearers for understanding the Gospel. The repetition of Ἡκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη . . . ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν or “You have heard it said . . . but I say to you” in Matt 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43 help the readers to understand that 5:21–47 consists of a unified series of saying in which Jesus provides his definitive interpretation of OT teaching. The beginning summary of this series in 5:17–20 and the concluding summary in 5:48 indicates that 5:17–48 should be understood as a unit, just as the introductory summary in Mark 4:1–2 and the concluding summary in 4:33–34 indicate that Mark 4:1–34 should be understood as a unit.

In Mark, does his frequent and often chronologically meaningless beginning of a new pericope by καὶ εὐθύς or “and immediately” suggest this may not simply be a careless redundancy but that he consciously intended by this to help his hearers realize that he was beginning a new story?²⁹ Thus something which might seem redundant and boring in our silent reading of Mark might be helpful and meaningful in the hearing of it. Similarly, Luke seems to help his readers by introducing various parables by ἄνθρωπός τις or, “there was a man who. . .” He does so in 14:16; 15:11; 16:1; 19:12 (cf. 12:16; 18:2). This indicates that Luke intended the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus in 16:19–31 to be understood by his hearers as a parable, because it also begins with ἄνθρωπός τις or “there was a man who. . .” Compare also how in 1 Corinthians Paul helps his hearers by the frequent use of Περὶ δέ or “Now concerning” in 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 15:1; and 16:1 to introduce a new subject that the Corinthian church had asked him about. In 7:1 he provides the framework for all these introductions by his more complete introduction, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote.”

b. *Summaries.* In numerous places Mark provides summaries for his hearers that not only bring a previous section to a close but also prepare his readers for the forthcoming section. We find this in 1:14–15; 3:7–12; 6:6b, and after each summary he provides a story concerning the disciples (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:7–13). In an important summary Mark explains to his hearers that the demonic confessions of Jesus are very important, for the demons are “reliable spokesmen” in this regard. In 1:34 he states, “. . . and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.” In 1:24 the demon states, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” And in 5:7 the demons say, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”

²⁹ Cf. Achtemeier, “*Omne verbum sonat*” 18, who points out that a series of ideas can be indicated by beginning each discussion with an identical word or phrase, and Ong, *Orality* 40–41. We can compare here the use of the waw-consecutive in Genesis one.

To these can be added another Markan summary in 3:11 where Mark writes, "And whenever the unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.'" By his summary in 1:34 Mark helps his hearers to understand that the demons' confessions represent a correct Christological understanding, that is, the demons are "reliable spokesmen" for his Christology.

c. Initial paradigmatic statements. Sometimes authors provide paradigmatic statements near the beginning of their works that are meant to help their hearers understand what follows. Luke does so in Acts 1:8 when he quotes Jesus' words, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." This serves as a summary outline to help his readers understand the Book of Acts. In 1:1–6:7 he describes the coming of the Spirit and how the gospel spread to Jerusalem. He ends this section in 6:7 with the summary, "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." In 6:8–9:31 he describes how the gospel spread to Judea and Samaria, and he ends in 9:31 with the summary, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied." In 9:32–12:24 he relates how the gospel spread to Syria and ends in 12:24 with a summary. In 12:25–16:5 he speaks of the spread of the gospel to Asia Minor; in 16:6–19:20 about its spread to Europe; and in 19:21–28:31 about its spread to Rome itself, and each of these sections also ends with a summary. In a similar manner, in Judg 2:11–23 the pattern of Israel's rebellion followed by God's retribution followed by Israel's repentance, followed by Israel's restoration provide a summary pattern by which the hearer is to understand the entire book.

The auditory signs and signals that Mark and other biblical writers gave to their hearers are not radically different from the same kind of signs and signals that we perceive when we silently read the biblical text. Yet, today when we organize the Gospel of Mark for our readers, we do so quite differently. We use Roman numerals to designate the major divisions, capital letters to indicate subsections of these major divisions, and Arabic numbers to indicate subsections of the subsections, etc. Or we use an Arabic number, followed by a period and another Arabic number, and still another period followed by another Arabic number, etc. Mark and the other biblical writers had to indicate this in a different way to their audiences, for they knew that they would be hearing the text read out loud to them and not poring over it with their eyes. Therefore "[c]lues to the organization of thought are, of necessity, based on sound rather than on sight."³⁰

³⁰ Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* xv. Cf. Thomas J. Farrell, "Early Christian Creeds and Controversies in the Light of the Orality-Literacy Hypothesis," *Oral Tradition* 2/1 (1987) 134: "Even though the material in the Bible obviously was written down, the writing . . . largely transcribed primary oral patterns of thought and expression . . . for what was written was obviously intended to be read aloud later."

III. CONCLUSION

It is now time to bring this paper to a conclusion. My paper "Is Our Reading of the Bible the Same as the Original Audience's Hearing it?" has consisted of two parts. The first, entitled "The Intended Readers of Mark," sought to demonstrate that Mark's intended readers were not readers in the traditional sense of the term "readers." Rather, they were "hearers." Their experience in hearing Mark was therefore closer to hearing a speech than reading a text, more like listening to this address than reading a manuscript of it. It was a verbal rather than a visual event, an auditory³¹ rather than an optic experience. The second part is entitled, "Consequences in the Goal of Interpretation as a Result of Understanding Mark's Intended Readers." In this section I suggested several consequences that are involved in understanding Mark and other biblical texts once we understand that they were consciously written for a hearing audience.

Let me repeat one of these consequences in closing. It is one that biblical scholars, like I, may be uncomfortable with. I argued that the meaning of Mark is probably one that a first-time hearer of the text would have been able to understand. As a result complicated and obscure interpretations most probably miss the more simple meaning that Mark intended his hearers to understand. Now I realize that the ability of Mark's first-century readers to retain in their memories what they heard was considerably greater than our ability. And this is especially true if, as I have suggested, they were already familiar with the Jesus traditions. I also recognize that Mark and the other NT writers may have penned "some things . . . hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16), as Peter says of Paul's writings. Nevertheless, Mark and the other NT authors did not intend to write secret, Gnostic works that only scholars in the twenty-first century would be able to understand. Mark, like the apostle Paul, most probably wrote for the "not many wise, according to worldly standards," the "not many powerful," the "not many of noble birth," but the "foolish and weak" of the believing community (1 Cor 1:26-27), who would hear his Gospel read aloud to them.

³¹ If I were thinking of this paper being primarily read in a journal, that is, read silently, I would have used here the word "aural," but since this paper was read to a hearing audience and since "aural" sounds almost identical to "oral" I chose to use the word "auditory." The vocabulary one chooses to use often differs for a hearing and a reading audience. Does this have implications for understanding Mark and other biblical books which were written for readers?