Mark's stories of Jesus' tomb and history

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ABSTRACT
Historical studies of Mk 16:1-8 concentrated on the issue of tradition and redaction. An approach informed by oral poetics is suggested as an escape from the stalemate achieved by the conventional alternatives. Mark's tomb stories are analysed from this perspective and suggestions are made about how early Christians might have found Mark's story about Jesus' death, burial and escape meaningful. Keeping some historical constraints in mind, possibilities underlying the narratives are explored.

1 INTERPRETING THE GOSPEL OF MARK
It is self-evident that to use Mark as a historical source one needs to understand the text. But this simply complicates matters: how should we approach Mark's Gospel?

Mark's antecedent orality is widely accepted in New Testament research. Interesting is that the very important question - how this fact affects the text's reading and interpretation - is seldom raised. During the heyday of Formgeschichte the dictum of Bultmann probably had a decisive influence: "it is ... a matter of indifference whether the tradition were oral or written" (1968:6).

More recent developments also influenced scholars not to raise this question: "At an earlier period in the history of New Testament scholarship the synoptic Gospels ... were thought to be relatively uncomplicated documents which had been put together without careful planning and which told a rather straightforward story. Today the synoptics are understood to be enormously intricate products containing subtle and ingenious literary patterns and highly developed theological interpretations" (Via 1970:vii).

It is well known that the Gospel of Mark has some very peculiar characteristics. These unusual aspects of Mark have been interpreted differently in the course of research. The main line has been to see them as the inevitable result of the activities of Mark, the redactor of traditions. Although the question about how comprehensive Mark's editing was is not settled, general agreement exists that the strangeness of the Gospel of Mark can be explained by seeing the text as a mixture of redaction and tradition.

The relation between redaction and tradition is of course a bone of contention: was Mark a conservative or liberal redactor? Depending on how one sees Mark's editorial activity, he can be described as either a very brilliant
author or as a rather incompetent editor. Significantly both views are substantiated from the text of Mark itself. On the one hand Taylor notes that "A more gifted writer would have arranged things differently, as the later Evangelists have done ..." (1966:112; see also Meagher 1979:144-148). On the other Mark is described as a "skillful, dramatic narrator" (Rhoads 1982:413), his story was "subtly composed, profound, and full of power" (Williams 1985:10). The different views on Mark 16:8 are well known. To Pryke (1978:45,127) this verse displays Mark's "many grammatical and stylistic errors ... a Gospel which also abounds in parenthesis, asyndeton, and anacolouthon,... an author who is no literary genius..." To Petersen (1980) Mark's ending entails some powerful rhetoric to activate his readers into participation in the story world and to Rhoads & Michie (1982:96-100) the Gospel ends in an "ambiguous resolution" that most successfully depicts the different conflicts in Mark. Indeed: "A writer previously pitied for his inability to write decent Greek or provide any kind of narrative syntax ... is now credited with architectonic powers that Virgil would not have despised" (Kermode 1978:148).

The conclusion is clear: the categories used to interpret the textual data are deficient. The inadequacy of current theories about Mark's Gospel is shown in not only the inability of any one to solve most of the problems, but specifically in the radically conflicting results achieved, usually with substantial "evidence" from the text itself. The problem can be described as finding features in the text that apparently make no sense to us (twentieth century literates) and the consequent need to devise explanatory theories.

I propose that Mark possesses an oral structure, similar to other examples of oral composition that survived in written form. Mark's Gospel is a recorded version of a story that was shaped through oral methods as part of an oral culture. The point therefore is that an "oral poetics" might be more appropriate to analysing and understanding this Gospel. A first step in this direction is some clarity about the "oral characteristics" of Mark.

Mark's style has drawn a lot of attention, described as "vernacular" (Turner 1976:11,21; cf Pryke 1978:29) with "striking affinities with the spoken language of everyday life" (Taylor 1966:52). One should note the problems involved in claims such as these. There is no such thing as exclusively oral characteristics or a totally unique oral style. What we have is a continuum of characteristics of spoken and written language that may be part of oral communication (Rosenberg 1987:77; Gray 1971:290; Finnegans 1974:52-59; Tannen 1982a; Finnegans 1988).

Some such qualities are noted by Dorson, taking his cue from the performance context of oral literature: "audiences are much less bothered by false starts, repetition, interjections, and obscure pronouns than are readers" (Dorson 1976:137). The fundamental issue determining oral style is the rhetorical strategies to facilitate "interpersonal involvement between speaker/writer and audience" (Tannen 1982b:xv).

There is something more to these dualities in Mark. Rosenberg has observed that "while repetition appears to be the chief criteria in determining orality, it is actually inadequate" (1976:100), remarking that the so called "stall formula" or the various forms of stalling, that is "language used repetitively (on either a lexical or syntactical level), whose formulation is somewhat automatic, so as to give the performer time to think of what to say next .... are perhaps the most significant stylistic feature of oral narrative" (1976:76). Seen in this light Mark's systematic use of synonymous expressions and repetitive vocabulary is quite significant.

Parentheses or "explanatory interpolations" (Vansina 1965:44) is also a prominent feature of orality. This too is conspicuous in Mark's Gospel (Turner 1976:26; noted as a Marcan editorial preference by Pryke 1978:32-35). Co-ordination or "additive style" (Lord 1960:54-55; 1987:54; Ong 1982:37-38) is a sure characteristic of oral composition (Chafe 1980:33-35; Goody 1977:127-128), although by no means exclusive to orality. Mark has a distinct paratactic style, note his "excessive use" (Turner 1963:334) of καί (see also Reiser 1984:99-137 [very comprehensive], Taylor 1966:48-49; Pesch 1976:24). In 15:40-16:8 alone Mark uses καί at least 16 times (in 18 sentences), a clear instance of "accumulation of conjunctions" (Lord 1987:54).

The "shift to present tense at key moments and the use of the rhetorical question, relatively uncommon in written narrative" (Gray 1971:300) are further possible features of orality. Both are obvious in Marcan style. At the least one should conclude that Mark's language reflects "most vividly ... the evidences of oral transmission, being written in a familiar colloquial style .... The manuscript is subject to oral conditioning, even though by its commitment of spoken utterance to writing it can, like print, be checked and become to some extent context-free.... The important point here is that most traditional narrative is determined in its essential form by its oral origin, but affected or qualified in various ways by the act of writing" (Brewer 1978:38-39, see also Kelber 1983:64-70).

It is my thesis that we must understand Mark's Gospel in continuity with oral tradition. In other words, Mark's Gospel is, even though it is a written artifact, an "utterance" and not a "text" - to use the terminology of Olson (1977). That Mark reflects oral composition raises the question: "What difference does a work's oral aspect make to its criticism, explanation, and study?" (Foley 1986:1).
2 THE GOSPEL OF MARK AND ORALITY

It is important to bear in mind that orality and its characteristics are highly complex matters with many indeterminable aspects involved; necessarily, subjective choices are at stake. Thus, "having made a choice one has to go on to admit that helpful as one's criteria are, none are completely clear-cut nor without problem" (Finnegan 1974:64; cf Mills 1987:87-88).

To really appreciate the importance of this concern about the implications of oral antecedents one must understand that different communication media, the disparity between orality and literacy, entails incisive differences between their noetic worlds and psychodynamics. We need to realise that "bring[ing] to mind and representing the past is quite different in oral cultures from what it is in cultures such as our own .... Often oral narrative processes strike us as divergent from what we consider 'normal', whereas in fact many mental processes which seem 'normal' to us have only recently been feasible at all" (Ong 1981:56; cf also McLuhan 1962; Goody 1977; 1987). Oral "texts" are distinctive; the primary oral mentality is characterized by concrete thinking, while the literate mentality is characterized by abstract thinking (Farrell 1987:132; Ong 1982:31-36,78-115). Orally, narrative unity is a more imprecise matter, deriving it from its traditional context, as well as from the performance situation (cf Mills 1987:90). The literate expectation of coherence is not directly applicable to oral literature (Scholes & Kellogg 1966:51), oral texts "require context and prior knowledge and wisdom for their interpretation" (Olson 1977:263). Delineating episodes should be done in a rough way: no one telling or listening makes clearcut segmentations in a story. In orality there are no white spaces, headings, boldfaced letters and numbers to delineate sections. Episodes are distinguished by narrating movements and describing places. It is important to tie events and important sayings to places (cf Labrie 1983:91).

The lack of evidence makes it impossible to prove that Mark must be understood as a piece of communication that reflects a predominantly oral situation - as it is impossible to prove the assumptions of Formgeschichte or for that matter of any other views on the origins of the Gospels. However, one can, and must in an academic context, make a hypothesis plausible. To strengthen my case I use two further arguments, the explanatory power of the theory and the historical context of orality.

Seen from the perspective of oral composition one can incorporate most traits of the text of Mark: the theory has explanatory scope. But the value of theories in historical interpretation is also determined by its ability to explain the origin (or possibility) of rival interpretations (McCullagh 1984:1-33). With this in view I point to the inability of the usual theories to explain the possibility of reading the text otherwise. Assuming an oral composition can explain why Mark's text can be read as both intriguing literature and inept narration. Oral poetics also gives one "power" to argue for the exclusion of
other interpretations in the case of Mark's Gospel. To illustrate: the abruptness of Mark's beginning as well as his "strange" episodic style have puzzled interpreters ever since the realisation dawned that the Gospels are not straightforward history. However, oral composition forces the performer to plunge the hearers "in medias res not because of any grand design, but perforce", illustrating that "episodic structure" is "the only way and the totally natural way of handling lengthy narrative" (Ong 1981:59,61).

A further aspect to keep in mind is the historical context of Mark; that is context in a very broad sense. Picture the Mediterranean world of the first century. Before the development of modern communication technology people were highly isolated; all information, whether historical, cultural, or religious was disseminated in face to face speech. The gap between rich and poor showed in literary skills. One can truly speak of two cultures existing side by side: a high literary culture flourishing among the upper class in large cities with the majority of people immersed in an oral and aural world. Although many people had a basic education and did learn to read and write (in Greek most probably, cf Garnsey & Saller 1987:187-188), few did so often, still fewer typically. Since books and/or scrolls were the property of the privileged, most people were functionally illiterate. Now one should follow the implications of this: how, for example, was knowledge "stored", transmitted, incorporated into life? "Nonliterate, unable to store their experience in print, must develop special mnemonic habits for the organization of cultural material" (Cole et al 1971:112). Everyday language would have been so structured to facilitate the continuation of knowledge and information, of which storytelling is a very important mode. Indeed, stories heard and told were the very stuff of knowledge (cf Foley 1987:92-93).

Stories were told in all sorts of settings: in schools, at meetings, over dinner, at an inn, during cultic activities or while travelling (walking). Professional storytellers could be hired and were part of most social events. Innumerable tales featured in any possible situation. Many were told to entertain, most carried the cultural knowledge essential for being part of a specific group. Stories were often about mighty heroes, obscure places, daring exploits, or fantastic events - simply to make them memorable.

Storytelling was an integral part of all aspects of life: from education (Homer as the basic texts), to politics, and religion. It was in such a world that people who saw themselves as apostles, prophets and teachers of Jesus of Nazareth would have told stories about him as they went about not only their cultic behaviour – preaching, leading worship, catechism, debates, celebration, justifying their behaviour – but also in general life. Although we know it only as a written text, Mark's Gospel originated, existed at first and had its first major importance in a context that was basically oral. This is to see it as quite the opposite of what Mack (1988:322-323) describes as the Marcan milieu: "It was composed at a desk in a scholar's study lined with texts and open to discourse with other intellectuals."
It does not seem as if the Marcan traditions functioned in a liturgical context; they are simply too informal. Certainly they do not fit into synagogical liturgy; if we take as a basis that all "ancient synagogues had a cult based on communal study or prayer" (Cohen 1987:175 — but granting that what happened in ancient Diaspora synagogues and what synagogues were about are extremely complex and difficult matters). Nor do they reflect a probable common sermon form of Hellenistic Judaism or early Christianity — following Wills (1984). The stories of which we know one version as the Gospel of Mark appear to have been performed in an unceremonious social context. As I picture it the "Marcan" storyteller was an itinerant teacher (or part of a group of itinerant Christians) in the style of Theissen's "wandering charismatics" (1978:7-16). The point cannot be argued in detail here, but it is probable that these storytellers — or "missionaries": Mark has some propagandistic elements — went about in much the same manner as Hock (1980) depicted Paul: craftsmen (or handymen) travelling and joining groups in cities for a limited time during which the stories about Jesus of Nazareth were (re-)told.

There is some comparative material that can illustrate this type of setting, for example Scottish "tinkermen". The importance of storytelling in the cultural equipment of a socially marginal group is demonstrated in studies on the role of stories in the context of these travellers' lives. The stories and story-activity offer psychological means of coping with the problems of their — not always easy — way of life (Douglas 1983; McDermitt 1983; Williamson 1983).

How did it come to be written down? It was probably dictated. The custom was well known in early Christianity (e.g Rom 16:22) and in biblical tradition (e.g Jer 36). Lord (1960:124-128) discusses the general theory about the dictation of formulaic poetry and Whallon (1969:208-210) similar questions regarding oral dictated texts (e.g Jesus' beatitudes). It is also possible that the storyteller himself wrote it down, following the custom of using a μεμβράνα (notebook — Roberts 1970:53-54; Kennedy 1978:148-154). This complicates matters somewhat as dictation has its effects on an oral presentation (Goody 1987:93-96).

I must note a crucial presupposition which informs my exposition of Mark. New Testament scholarship is almost unanimous that the Gospels developed from individual short stories that circulated independently for a considerable period, and that Mark was actually one of the first attempts at unifying or combining a great many of these traditions, if not the very first. This is the cardinal assumption of Formgeschichte, and has been criticised with little effect. The idea undergirds Theissen and even Kelber's work (Theissen 1978, 1983; Kelber 1983:78-79). This is the result of a developmental concept of the stories about Jesus, so competently criticised by Kelber himself (1983:1-34). That some followers of Jesus only told miracle stories and others only parables is unimaginable. It seems more probable to posit the existence of extended stories about Jesus from a very early stage.
The issue of setting is of some importance, as the performance context (setting) is the most important organising principle in the interpretative description of oral literature (Bauman 1975:298). I do not think that the "Marcan" storytellers were official guardians of Jesus-traditions within the community. As itinerant preachers they were literally part of the development of early Christianity. They facilitated the movement from Palestine to the Diaspora, from the Jewish world to the Greco-Roman world, from a Jewish reform sect to becoming a Hellenistic cult. This can most clearly be seen in the mixed audience of Mark, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles (Mack 1988:101). Note the presence of explanations to non-Jews (e.g. 5:41; 7:3-4) and also several instances presupposing knowledge of the Jewish world (fasting, Sabbath, temple curtain). An informal setting makes the quality of the story-telling (or meaning if you prefer) a matter of interplay between narrative repertoire, communicative resources and individual, situation specific, conceptualisation. By seeing it as a product outside formal (liturgical) activity the emphasis is moved to the production event itself: a reorientation from tradition as materials to tradition as experience of intersubjective communication.

It should be approached as verbal art, fused into verbal behaviour. Methodologically one starts from the text, but on an interpretative level the approach is through performance, and that means in our case that the living world itself becomes the point of reference. The issue of tradition and redaction simply disappears: it is not possible to think in those terms within an oral poetics. So the question of the "historical" core of the stories changes: one no longer looks for the older, more reliable bits, but attempts to understand the relationship of the characters and themes with the repertoire of stories and motifs that shaped, influenced and generated the story under review.

Mark is an "inside" event. Oral communication happens face-to-face. It reflects the culture, values and opinions of the group, which are presupposed in its re-telling and confirms and illustrates them. In contrast to explicit written stories it is not aimed at an unknown "outside". It has no complicated message; it reflects existing meanings and beliefs. It has little external function (that is, outside the immediate communication event), it exposes the reality of certain people and describes the beliefs that underlie their world; that is why they are memorable: they preserve important cultural information. Mark can be described as both foundational and primordial myth (contra Perrin 1977:38). It is in this evocative combination of the ordinary with the arcane that Mark's story really comes alive.

The description "Marcan group" is a bit of a misnomer. The stories were carried not by a settled community, but by itinerant teachers. It is only within such a context that the radical ethics and subversive life-style claimed by the Marcan stories could possibly have been transmitted believably. In its contact with society these stories obviously had a powerful impact (and evoked resentment). Much in the vein of Cynic radicalism (see Downing 1987:51-
125) the Gospel of Mark was part of "enacted parables", stories and lifestyles intent on challenging and transforming society.

The Marcan stories "are a world created to the measure of orality, mnemonically as well as conceptually" (Kelber 1983:57 – referring to the miracle stories). They inculcate propriety through the vehicle of memorisable examples, narrated as actions. Orality fuses beliefs and practices with human situations, they are made to emanate out of dramatic scenes. In an oral world stories personalise and actualise the information to be remembered. Ethics is expressed in terms of application, rather than generalisation.

The pertinent aspect of oral poetics is the quest for associative meanings, an explication of an almost endless congregating of images (one can even adopt the concepts of deconstructing and intertextuality – but enough pitfalls have been crossed already). Verbal activity as such is what it is about.

3 MARK'S STORY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

"The challenge for the storyteller is not to contemplate Jesus with theological acumen, nor to restore his historical actuality, but rather to make him live in the imagination of the audience" (Kelber 1983:55). What matters is the functioning of roles, not the portrayal of characters. The actions and persons are typical rather than unique, and rich in imaginative and evocative qualities.

Mark's intention is clear: the depiction of a hero-martyr vindicated. The life-story or "hero" pattern governs the entire narrative tradition from which Mark originated. The Jesus who is pictured through patterned episodes is a heroical, impressive figure. Jesus is the teacher, healer, leader, martyr saving his own. The story serves, intensifies and simultaneously simplifies the basic aspects of being human: frailty, mortality, hope for the kingdom, meaning in suffering – in that sense it is truly timeless.

The logic behind the story of Jesus' crucifixion is interwoven with contemporary conceptions of martyrdom (see 4 Macc; WisSol; the concept of the noble death in Greek literary traditions; Williams 1975:91-197; Nickelsburg 1972; Mack 1988:105-110; Jeremias 1971:286-288,292). The martyr is one who proves his faithfulness to a righteous cause by refusing to capitulate before enemies who threaten to kill him" (Mack 1988:105). The martyr is justified or rewarded with some post-mortem fate, and the cause for which the martyr died is also vindicated. The hero of Mark trusts in God, his mission is to preach the kingdom of God, to be the perfect son of God.

The story opens the hearer into the world of sharing Jesus' faith. Faith is endurance (like Jesus'), and turns execution into a martyr's death, thereby effecting expiation. To adopt an insight from Theissen (1983:285): "'Faith' may be central, but it does not mean a personal relationship with Jesus, but that unconditional desire which receives the promise ἀναπαύεται (Mk 9.23)". Sharing Jesus' faith is indeed worthwhile – God himself demonstrated that it works! The disciple must follow (exemplify) his hero; his death, however, becomes effective for his own life (not for the salvation of others –
"Were it not for Jesus' inaugural martyrdom, there would not even be the possibility for the disciple to consider salvation" (Mack 1988:345).

Mark's story of Jesus on the way depicts the itinerant and marginal world of the storyteller(s) which is probably idealised by the listeners. In vivid language they picture the life of faith. But Mark softens the subversive aspect of his story. The narrative authenticates the very world in which the listeners live. The heroic Jesus "operates as an ordering presence, inveighing against instability and restoring the structures of the human lifeworld" (Kelber 1983:53). The radical implications of being a follower is made acceptable: the motivations remain the same.

4 INTERPRETING MARK'S TOMB STORIES

How would one "read" Mark 16:1-8 from an oral perspective? The artificial nature of such an enterprise need not be stressed; as little as a tomb inscription can tell of the life it witnesses to can this sort of investigation recapture the power of the original story-telling events.

There are basically two episodes at the end of Mark's Gospel: the crucifixion and the tomb. Joseph of Arimathea functions as a sort of connector between the two scenes. There is a persistence in vocabulary (noted by Pesch 1977:519) giving the tomb stories a thematic unity. Two elements are specifically noteworthy: the ἡγερεῖ (15:40a; 15:47b; 16:4) and the name lists. The one episode climaxes with the women looking on "from a distance" (and not with the centurion confessing his faith), the other with the women running away from Jesus' tomb with the young man inside.

The scene where Joseph of Arimathea asks Jesus' body from Pilate is an excellent example of oral narrativity. The physical scenery is completely simplified. Joseph simply goes to Pilate, the centurion is immediately present. How Mark could possibly have known all this is just not a problem, detail (historical problems) such as obtaining access to the procurator, soliciting (bribing?) help and moving a corpse are all irrelevant. Pilate's question to the centurion (noted as apologetic by many commentators to explain/confirm Jesus' quick death) should be seen as part of the repetitive nature of orality. The hero does not merely die, some tension is connected to his dying: did he really die?

The women are identified three times. To the first occurrence Mark adds an explanatory note: the women were disciples (15:41). In the second list (15:47) Salome is dropped, while the other Mary is identified differently in all three instances. This repetition has been described as one of the main problems in the interpretation of Mark 16:1-2 by Kim (1978:57), note his reaction: "The repetition is intentional rather than redundant.... Mark intends to name them three times so that they may function as witnesses in a special way" (Kim 1978:58). Bultmann saw the repetition as evidence that Mark 16:1-8 was a "quite secondary formulation" (1968:284), the differences showing the original individuality of the stories and Mark's poor editing (1968:276). The
same differences can also show reliability, an indication of tradition (Schweizer 1970:363). But this sort of reduplication of names is characteristic of oral composition. Typical of oral stories is that they lack consistency ("When the same name is repeated anywhere in a list transposition or even elision easily occurs" – Vansina 1985:181).

Mark has the women going to the tomb to anoint Jesus, having bought spices. In terms of history this is quite implausible (as noted by most commentators), but the story needs witnesses, and the sheer importance of proper burial in the contemporary world (Hopkins 1983:205-217; Toynbee 1971; Safrai 1976:773) provides the motive. Here we see the narrative opening as a window onto an ancient social world.

Several examples of "ritual elaboration" (Lord 1987:57) or redundancies are obvious in Mark 16:1-8: the time notices, the question about rolling the stone away; the γάρ sentence (v4b) that appears to be "logically" out of place.

The νεανίσκος that appears so suddenly in the narrative is usually identified as an angel, citing comparative texts in which angels are described as young men. However, one should add that these texts (e.g. 2 Macc 3:26; Tob 5:5; JosAnt 5.8.2) are quite explicit that they are describing heavenly beings – which Mark is not. It is difficult to know how one should see Mark’s reference. An interesting feature of folklore that may throw light on the strange young men in Mark is the appearance of an aide, helper or supplicant at crucial moments. The helper is no character in the story; he is almost an apparition, simply there to get the story on. In this sense the issue is indeed the message, as emphasised by many commentators.

An immense amount of material has been written on Mark 16:6-7, specifically about προδότη υμῶν εἰς τὴν Γαλατίαν ἐκείνου ὀφθαλμὸν ὁμολόγης. One should look at the obvious logic. If he is not here he will be seen somewhere else. The naming of Galilee has much the same function as the naming of the women: it makes "he is not here" realistic. Jesus and his disciples are tied to the (last) "stop" in a series of linked locations. Whether the Marcan Galilee should be seen symbolically is a moot point, but the name does elicit pictures of Jesus’ deeds and of following him (e.g. 15:41).

Imagine the story before a Greco-Roman audience with their typical belief in immortality (Toynbee 1971:34). The sheer fact of the survival of the story shows its dramatic impact: not only a change in existence but total escape from death! The story emphasises the death of Jesus, his burial and that he was somehow released from his tomb, an awesome point indeed. No wonder the women fled, εἶχεν τρόμος καὶ ἐκπόνησι καὶ οὐδεὶς οὐδὲν εἶπαν· ἐφοβότοι γὰρ. In this the women actualise the impact of the story, and paradoxically, but quite appropriately, the "said nothing to any one" probably generated many more (re-) telling of stories: about Moses, Elijah, the Maccabean martyrs and others.

Orality tends to show characters in "heavy" terms (Ong 1982:69-72), to elaborate their actions in an unrealistic manner. This serves mnemonic needs
as well as significance. The strange behaviour of Mark’s women then points to the effect of the young man’s message.

The upshot is clear: Mark 16:1-8 is a story about an empty tomb, and whatever else became of or was made of these stories, in Mark’s Gospel the point is not about some resurrection to δώξα (e.g. Jeremias 1971:309) but about the “Nichtauffindbarkeit seines Leichnams” (Pesch 1977:527). The very fact that several studies have been done to prove the importance of resurrection to Mark alerts one to take this Gospel’s reticence about it very seriously. It has long been noted that the resurrection plays a minor role in Mark, and has been exploited with interesting effects (e.g. Weeden 1971; Crossan 1978).

The effect of missing Mark’s point — in a manner of speaking — is truly far-reaching. The story is about the death of a great man, and therefore about death itself. There is no focus on something above time, outside of reality.

I have already referred to the traditional nature of oral texts, that they function within a sphere of motifs and themes. “A singer effects, not a transfer of his own intentions, but a conventional realisation of traditional thought for his listeners, including himself” (Peabody 1975:176). Mark’s stories are actualisations of a narrative repertoire, and as such meaningful. “The singer is not conveying ‘information’ in our ordinary sense of ‘a pipe-line transfer’ of data from singer to listener. Basically, the singer is remembering in a curiously public way — remembering not a memorised text, for there is no such thing, nor any verbatim succession of words, but the themes and formulas that he has heard other singers sing” (Ong 1981:61).

The belief that God can intervene and save one in extremely difficult situations goes without ado with the reason for remaining faithful. Stories and motifs amplifying, illustrating and intensifying the conviction of God defeating the power of nature are the core of faith. One remarkable aspect of a great many of these stories is a miraculous opening of doors (called Türöffnungstraditionen by Weinreich 1929). Mark narrates an unexpected opening of the tomb door, emphasising its size, that went unseen by human eyes. This could only trigger the association of God’s powerful intervention, as in other similar stories (e.g. Ac 12 and 16, PhilostrVitAp 7.34, 38; 8.30; OvMet 3.699-700; EurBacch 447-448; JosBJ 6.293; even in legends about Moses: EusPE 9.27.23 (= Artapanus fr 3). See further Kratz 1979:351-439, Jeremias 1965; Theissen 1983:99-103). It also reflects something of what Mark and his audience themselves expected.

Pesch has alerted us to the importance of the widespread and pervasive motif of a search for and disappearance of an important dead or dying person (1977:522-525). This is highly important for grasping the powerful impact of the Marcan narratives. In Judaism the legends of Elijah (with 2 Ki 2:16-18 as fountainhead) had a decisive influence. According to the Old Testament narratives Elijah was searched for for three days, but he could not be found. He was taken up — to God. One picks up a Marcan motif: Jesus finally joined
Moses and Elijah "taken up into heaven by the Creator the King" (Test/Job 39:12, referring to Job's crushed children). Indeed: "Now I know that I have a memorial with the Lord" (Test/Job 40:4, the reaction of Job's wife).

The importance of the theme becomes more visible once we move to Greco-Roman lore (e.g. Plut/Num 2.2; Rom 28.5; Liv/Ad Urbe 1.40.3; cf. Chariton ChaerCall 3.3. See further Alsup 1975:221-239). Even the Roman apotheosis of heroes (emperors/rulers) reflects the motif. The power of the associations is clear: Jesus was given (or gained) access to divinity, more power and capability of providing benefaction. One can also see in the hero who "is not here" the desire to give meaning to life by escaping death itself.

Implicit in the dissemination of Jesus-values is a democratisation of heaven in a manner of speaking – whereas most would have gone to Hades, joined some shadow existence, the new value among Christians is that all the suffering faithful will join Jesus.

The brevity of Mark 16:1-8 hides a wide range of code words stirring the imagination: the ultimate objective of the oral process is to make the information virtually present in the mind, to be highly suggestive, and to spark visual images in the listener (adapting Kelber 1983:57).

5 INTERPRETING THE NARRATED EVENTS

It is noteworthy how glib New Testament scholars and theologians are about the so-called historical events making up the resurrection of Jesus. Simplification is a serious outrage against the past, and unscientific. In this section my aim is to draw attention to the complexities of historical construction.

The possibilities of going beyond Mark are extremely slim: we have absolutely no way of checking the transmission of the information, which is vital for historical evaluation (Vansina 1965:114-140). This limitation – the fact that the compositional history of biblical traditions is undocumented (cf. Mills 1987:89) should not only be acknowledged but the implication should be taken seriously. We can only make informed guesses.

Mark 16:1-8 has been called a "quite secondary construction", an "apologetic legend" (Bultmann 1968:284, 287), belonging "to a late state of Easter traditions" (Jeremias 1971:304). But with internal criteria it is impossible to determine at what stage a story entered a tradition. "Stories and sayings are authenticated not by virtue of their historical reliability, but on the authority of the speaker and by the reception of hearers" (Kelber 1983:71). More importantly, getting to the "older" traditions is no guarantee of reliability.

To develop plausible historical reconstructions of what "really happened" – that is, an interpretation from a different (modern) perspective, couched in present experience – one should start with a historical framework and then match one's problematic against it, moving "from the evidence which is most secure and least ambiguous to more uncertain evidence" (Sanders 1985:11).
Harvey, in much the same vein, refers to "historical constraints", historical possibilities open to people at a specific time (1982:1-10).

The story of Joseph of Arimathea seems plausible. Although the corpses of criminals were usually thrown in common graves or pits by the Romans, we have archaeological evidence of a crucified Jew given a proper burial: one of the ossuaries found at Giv'at ha-Mivtar in 1968, dating from about the middle of the first century contained the skeleton of a crucified young man with his bones all neatly packed, ready for the resurrection (Tzaferis 1970,1985; Haas 1970:42,49-59; Meyers 1971a:89-92; Zias & Sekeles 1985; Kuhn 1979). Josephus also informs us that "the Jews pay so much regard to obsequies that even those found guilty and crucified are taken down and buried before sunset" (BJ 4.317).

Lane states that "burial of the dead as an act of piety" lies behind Joseph of Arimathea's request for Pilate's permission to bury Jesus (1974:578). Joseph's "earnest expectation of the coming redemption had apparently attracted him to Jesus and his teaching concerning the kingdom of God" (579 - note how Joseph's motives become something we can identify with). When interpreting Mark's description of Joseph as one who was also προσδεχόμενος τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, these terms must be defined historically. Seen within the world of first century Jewish burial customs (Meyers 1971a, 1971b; Rahmani 1973; Hachlili & Killebrew 1983; Rahmani 1986) it is probably more correct to see Joseph's motives (if Mark's narrative can be trusted) connected to his desire to be buried with Jesus (a powerful prophet – 6:15, 9:13) in a few years' time so that when Messiah comes he will be resurrected in Jesus' company. More mundane: if Elisha performed even more marvel­lous works in his death (Sir 48:13-14), what might not happen to Joseph taking care of the dead Jesus?

Interestingly, however, no one bothered to tell us what Joseph of Arimathea thought or did when he saw the disappearance of his investment. Or whatever he did, it was kept quiet by Christian sources. So it seems more plausible to see the impressive burial of Jesus as an event created by the story itself. Burials were extremely important to people of antiquity, and a story of one's hero without appropriate burial would not have survived. Still, it seems probable that the eminent Jews involved in Jesus' execution buried him (see Ac 13:27-29; Jn 19:31; cf Fuller 1971:54-55), so as not to profane the sabbath and to let the decomposition of his flesh expiate for his sins (cf Rahmani 1973:121; Meyers 1971a:80-84).

But even if the Jewish leaders buried Jesus it is quite possible that his followers did not know where his grave was. Clearly the possibilities are ambiguous (like most of history) and more subjective factors come into play when choices are made. One cannot ignore the importance of consequent developments: obviously some very powerful events took place involving Jesus' disciples after his burial. I am inclined to see this in the confirmation they experienced in their own success at working miracles (for the
inestimable role of miracles in the success of Christianity: MacMullen 1983:185-187; MacMullen 1984:25,40, passim). Post-burial appearances are a well known phenomenon in all ages (Hopkins 1983:223; Bennett 1987:36-81), and alone could not cause such a highly motivated movement.

I would venture to say that some women (or only Mary?) noticed some irregularity at some time (not necessarily after three days) at the suspected tomb of Jesus. A death diagnosis is extremely complex and difficult even today despite the advances made. The complexities were well known in antiquity. Aulus Cornelius Celsus, writing during the reign of Tiberius, discusses the problems in diagnosing death, noting that "medicine is a tentative thing" (Celsus, De Medicina 2.6.13-16). Pliny Senior also collected some instances of incomplete or wrong diagnosis of death (NH 7.173-179), informing his readers that "there are also cases of persons appearing after burial" but prefers not to continue as his subject is concerned with science and not prodigies. Jewish custom was to visit the grave within three days to ensure the dead was really dead (Safrai 1976:785). The point is to realise that seen from the side of so-called evidence it is simply special pleading to insist on only one possible interpretation.

Another way open to us is to look at the implications of a change in the hearer-situation, using the bias of the stories as a possible historical guide. All oral traditions "have political or social functions" (Vansina 1965:170), and the "historical information to be obtained by studying these traditions is restricted by the framework of reference constructed by the society in question" (Vansina 1965:171). I think it possible to argue that a pervasive interest existed in a hero’s empty tomb, even back in a Jewish, Palestinian context. That makes the Marcan tomb stories very "old", but still does not help us to reach clarity. In this connection Paul’s silence on the empty tomb is even more significant.

6 CONCLUSION

Being serious about Mark's generally accepted oral antecedents as the clue to the text opens different and productive avenues of investigation. The Gospel of Mark tells the life-story of a vindicated hero-martyr, Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, involving an audience in deep trust of God and reflecting the wish not to die senselessly.

Mark focuses on the tomb of Jesus. “Resurrection” is not an issue to his mind, it is the vindication of Jesus and his cause. He leaves his audience at a tomb scene, stimulating amazement. Burials and tombs were highly important aspects to the societies of antiquity. Mark's impressive way of showing that Jesus was not in his tomb, despite crucifixion and a large stone, claiming that his disciples will see Jesus in Galilee and his description of terrified women, evoke the wide ranging and powerful imagery of people who were mysteriously saved (by God). His story entangles his listeners in the mystery of somehow escaping the destruction of death, by mentally releasing the
flood of "the body is not here" stories. He reflects powerful needs and uses verbal expressiveness to cope with it.

What one makes of these stories is a highly complex question involving many (personal) aspects. In my own experience the Marcian tomb stories trigger a self-critical awareness: people created a different world and this possibility stimulates thought. In this it is already a meaningful story.

The historical events underlying the Marcian stories are lost in the mists of time; one can only juggle with possibilities. We can no longer interpret those events in the same way and with the same verbal art. Of course, attempts can be made to restate the Marcian story, for example by saying that Jesus left this universe for an indeterminate time (Craig 1980:70), but that is a pale shadow of what Mark said. He lived in a single cosmos (and so do I) of which God was very much part. Rather admit Mark and his world to be Mark and the world of antiquity. Its evocation is not diminished thereby and one does not fall into the trap of final truths.

This essay is an attempt at a historical understanding of Mark. It is, however, an exploratory attempt, offered with the practical aim of furthering critical dialogue. The role of a critical and historical reading of Mark in expanding meaningful and pragmatic discourse about our religious traditions is obvious.

NOTE

I accept Mk 16:8 as the conclusion of the Gospel. Reasons for doing this are: the textual witnesses; the "lack of appearance stories" can explain the addition of the other endings in the textual tradition; the number of words that appear in 16:9-20 but nowhere else in the Gospel, in some cases the whole of the New Testament; certain syntactical constructions differing from the rest of the Gospel and the abrupt transition between verses 8 and 9. I do not consider the yap clause a problem (Danker 1964:366; Van der Horst 1972; Boomershine & Bartholomew 1981:214; Lightfoot 1950:80-97,106-116; Aland 1974:455-464); if a sentence can end with it so can a book. Although most scholars would admit that the external evidence is not conclusive there remains a persistent conviction that internal evidence can be. But it should be admitted that even that can point both ways: there is no unequivocal argument either way. Of the few scholars who attempted to defend 16:9-20 as the original reading, Farmer (1974) provides some very interesting arguments: plausible explanations for the external evidence, as well as an appeal to internal considerations concluding that only v10 is non-Marcian. He poses two important questions: why the longer reading is not seen as the more difficult one (especially v18) and what the origin (the context) was of the longer reading if it was not the original. Could it have been possible for some Christians to impose on the church at large an addition to the text of the second Gospel? (see further Linnemann 1969; Elliott 1971;
Trompf 1972). The general effect of all this is that claims such as "The text-critical debate over Mark 16:9-20 has for all practical purposes been settled" (Magness 1985:4) are rather over-optimistic, and misrepresents the subjectivity of the choices involved. As much as one would like to take up Aland’s challenge to New Testament scholarship to take textual criticism serious (1974:469-470), I am not convinced that it is possible to reach "Fakten der Textkritik". One can argue for a certain reading, but finally the choice reflects as much of one’s preferences and convictions as of so-called evidence. Researchers have tended to divorce a further question from the possibility of 16:8 as Mark’s ending, namely whether Mark intended to end his Gospel at this point; implying that although the evidence confirms the reading and that the longer endings are non-Marcan, part of the Gospel was somehow lost during transmission or that Mark himself was prevented from finishing his Gospel (Schweizer 1971:373; Klostermann 1950:172; Bultmann 1968:285; Taylor 1966:609-610). Obviously it is impossible to answer the question. It is best to stick to what we have; it is "methodologically unsound to base an argument on the one-time existence of material for which absolutely no extant trace has been found" (Weeden 1971:46). "The most responsible means of dealing with this problem is ... to make sense of what exists..." (Thomas 1983:418). This discussion shows that the very evidence we have is unstable; already determined by involved subjective factors. From the beginning one must know that what one says about Mark’s Gospel, conservative or critical or whatever, can never ever be anything more than an informed opinion.

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