

The task of understanding the Gospel traditions: Werner Kelber's contribution to New Testament research

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Abstract

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research

The research of WH Kelber on the Gospel traditions have important implications. His main emphases are summarized and certain aspects briefly commended. A critical discussion concerning the aims of interpretation, the issue of conflicting traditions, the immense problem of orality and the interpretation of Mark is concluded with an argument on the necessity and pitfalls of multidisciplinary research.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are several excellent reasons to take cognizance of the work of Werner Kelber. He has been described as 'a courageous pioneer' (Brodie 1984: 575) and his work as a 'breakthrough' (Farrel 1987: 27). His main focus has been on the Gospel of Mark, but he has also contributed to Pauline and Johannine scholarship. A feature of his (later) work is interdisciplinary methodology, combining aspects of linguistics, folklore, literary history and criticism, anthropology and sociology with biblical criticism.

Although the direct impetus for my interest in the contributions of Kelber is my own research on the Gospel of Mark, I find his work convenient to highlight some ill considered problems in Gospel research. Amongst these is the lack of reflection on the issues and problems of interdisciplinary research.

A critical appreciation of what Kelber is doing is an acknowledgement of the value and significance of his studies. In this sense it is important to emphasize that the critical aspect is also a self-critical undertaking. Analysis and evaluation fulfill

their purpose by increasing one's awareness of the vulnerability and problematic of one's own perspective.

The extent of Kelber's list of publications makes it self-evident that one cannot possibly do justice to every aspect of his work within the scope of a paper. What follows is a selection of aspects I found thought provoking. The structure adopted is primarily for the sake of convenience.

2. WHAT DOES KELBER SAY?

2.1 Mark and his traditions

The development of Gospel criticism has made it common concern to see the Gospels as a combination of traditions and redaction, the precise relation differing from scholar to scholar according to a host of factors. Eventually, however, as is well known, the evangelists' editorial activity and the 'discovery' of their creative input became highly prominent. Given the assumption of Mark's priority the problem of determining the *extent* of redaction is obvious. More importantly, it was simply a matter of time before the logical implication of the *principle* of redaction was realized: there could be no limit to editorial activity. This forms the background for the major developments in American Gospel criticism of the seventies and eighties (as noted by Kelber himself, 1984: 460).

To gain a sense of the context in which Kelber's initial studies developed I note some aspects of the work of Norman Perrin and Theodore Weeden.

Perrin initially defined redaction criticism as the study concerned with 'the theological motivation of an author as this is revealed in the collection, arrangement, editing, and modification of traditional material, and in the composition of new forms within the traditions of early Christianity' (1970: 1). In other words, he 'viewed the Gospel narratives as high points of interpretation rather than as bedrock of history' (Kelber 1984: 453). This is a succinct commentary on contemporary approaches to the Gospels, and also of Kelber's, obvious from his first publications.

Weeden argued that Mark was in deliberate conflict with his sources, hence the title of his work *Mark: Traditions in conflict* (1971). According to Weeden, 'Mark is assiduously involved in a vendetta against the disciples. He is intent on totally discrediting them. He paints them as obtuse, obdurate, recalcitrant men who are at first unperceptive of Jesus' messiahship, then opposes its style and character, and finally rejects it. As the *coup de grace*, Mark closes his Gospel without rehabilitating the disciples' (1971: 50-1). The reason for this sharp reaction of Mark is a

Christological controversy in his community. His opponents, exponents of a theology of glory, claim the authentic Jesus traditions for their viewpoint. In response, Mark incorporated their very claims in his historical drama, the disciples representing the opponents and Jesus acting out Mark's theology (of the cross). Thus Weeden introduced the notion of conflicting traditions underlying the Markan Gospel.

2.1.1 Kelber's first major work (1974) is a quite comprehensive redaction critical investigation into the origin, structure and purpose of Mark. As Kelber sees it, Mark did not simply *edit* his materials. He drastically *restructured* the traditions available to him. The whole is therefore intelligible *only* from Mark's concerns. In fact, Mark's use of Scripture 'with extraordinary disregard for their original contextual setting' is paradigmatic of his use of (synoptic) tradition (1983: 197, cf 1980: 37).

The Gospel of Mark is about the re-appropriation of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God. Mark is situating his community within the history of the kingdom, 'in order to assign to his own people a place of hope in the midst of it' (1974: 42). The kingdom is anonymous and hidden at present. 'Born out of conflict, God's rule on earth exists in, and suffers a state of conflict' (1974: 41). Fundamentally, Mark is – according to Kelber – about eschatology, which 'is of ultimate concern to Mark, and the realized eschatology of the Galilean Kingdom serves as premise for, and holds the hermeneutical key to Markan theology' (1974: 11).

Mark, 'the spokesman of Galilean Christians' (1974: 130), wrote his Gospel shortly after AD 70 in response to the crisis in the Christian community caused by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The crisis, more specifically, was due to prophets and leaders in the Jerusalem-Judean Christian community who mistakenly promised the *parousia* of Jesus in connection with the Jewish-Roman war in Jerusalem. The 'evangelist makes an issue of the disaster' (1974: 130) exactly because Christians were profoundly affected by the failure of the *parousia* and the power struggle of the Jerusalem Christians. The Markan community, existing in northern Palestine (Galilee), is promoted in the story as the centre for the *parousia* and the final manifestation of the kingdom (Mk 14: 28, 16: 7). Galilee was divinized and unified by Jesus' miracles (1974: 45-65).

Kelber solves the well known problem of Mark's unusual portrait of the disciples by seeing them as instances of a defective Jesus tradition. The disciples are symbolically representatives of his 'opponents'. The denigration of the disciples and the family of Jesus is thus actually a polemic against the Jerusalem church. The Jerusalem Christian community 'traced its origin to the relatives of Jesus,

considered itself standing in unbroken tradition with the twelve under the primacy of Peter, and advocated a faith in so Jewish a fashion as to be – in the eyes of Mark ... virtually indistinguishable from, and thus guilty of cooperating with, the Jewish power structure' (1974: 64). The disciples and their heirs were concerned about their national identities, and mainly interested in claiming authority and working miracles (= what Jesus opposed in the discipleship narrative (Mk 8-10) and in Mk 13). The consistent failing of the disciples show that all of their claims to authority are contrary to Jesus' intentions; it equals abandonment of Jesus, and in fact none of the disciples can claim a commissioning from Jesus. They were never reinstated after their flight as the women never told them of the resurrected Jesus. 'More and more ... the disciples emerge as the real powers that stand in the way of the fulfillment of the Kingdom' (1974: 63). Therefore, they are 'banished to the outside, at one with the family and the Jerusalem establishment' (1974: 64), as they are not interested in 'Galilee' where Greek and Jew were united.

Mark's specially designed spatial configuration of north – south – north (Galilee – temple mount – Mount of Olives – Galilee) 'provides the topological framework of the Gospel. ... Mark's conceptual world must find its natural explanation arising out of this circumspectly controlled space world and in full conformity with the inherent Galilee – Jerusalem antithesis' (1974: 129). Hence the main purpose of the Gospel's plot has been to discredit the eschatological prestige of Jerusalem and its holy place, and to reinstate Galilee as the new place, and the near future as the new time, of God.

The interpretation of Mark against the background of the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and polemizing against the role of Jewish Christians in that destruction are persistent themes in Kelber's understanding of Mark (1979a: 13-14; 1983: 210-11). His (redaction-critical) conclusion that the disciples are rejected by the Markan Jesus influenced all his subsequent work on Mark. This is all the more noteworthy as Kelber claims to have utilized different assumptions about the interpretation of the Gospels in his later work.

2.1.2 In his second book on Mark (1979a), Kelber self-consciously adopts the position of literary criticism, that is 'to approach the Markan story as ... any other story' (1979a: 11). 'To read Mark through the glasses of the other Gospels would violate the integrity of Mark and misapprehend the nature of all four Gospel writers. ... The reading of Mark demands a single-minded concentration on the Markan text' (1979a: 12). Mark's Gospel is a dispute with the authority figures of the Jerusalem church, represented by the Twelve who are in constant conflict with Jesus' true mission and identity. The conflict is set within a narrative which

construes Jesus' public career as a series of journeys, in each of which his followers progressively distance themselves from his objective, namely coronation through humiliation and death.

'The disciples, as Mark sees them, fail to listen to the voice of Jesus and promptly adopt a whole system of self-serving values' (1979a: 96). In other words, the portrait of the disciples is interpreted from the perspective of 16: 8, which is understood in the sense of 'the women disobeyed and never said a word to the disciples'.

Noteworthy is that Kelber writes about Mark's elimination of all authority as reminiscent of Reformation theology (1979a: 95).

2.1.3 A later study specifically devoted to the disciples in Mark (Kelber 1985a) criticizes previous scholarship for consistently underrating 'the integrity of a Gospel and the novelty of its form' and for not realizing that 'the Gospel could have been written for the purpose of correcting ... tradition' (1985a: 26). That means 'we ought to be mindful of *traditions* in the plural ... the synoptic history appeared ... as a struggle between competing and possibly irreconcilable viewpoints' (1985a: 27); something that had long been commonplace in Pauline studies. Traditional Markan scholarship also fails due to a supposed postresurrectional resolution of the disciples' failure and a 'disregard for narrative' (1985a: 32).

He notes the following characteristics of Mark as especially important: a reserved attitude toward sayings, a repossession of the earthly life of Jesus that culminates in death rather than in resurrection, a withholding of the risen Lord from the disciples, the banishment of the disciples – initial insiders – toward the outside. 'Together these features appear to subvert a genre partial toward sayings, the primary unit of oral speech, and partial also toward the risen Lord, who continues speaking through apostolic, prophetic personalities' (1985a: 41).

So the corrective function of the form of the Gospel almost leaps to the eye. For by withholding the resurrection, Mark undermines a crucial starting point for oral tradition; by narrating the earthly Jesus and his death he has countered a *Gattung* rooted in the risen Lord; and by relegating the disciples to the outside he has completed what amounts to an anti-genre to the genre of a sayings tradition (1985a: 41-42). 'Put simply, Mark was up against a tradition that perceived itself to be apostolic. ... the genre of the orthodox Gospel has transformed Jesus' whole life and, above all, his death into the mystery that is accessible not to the few but to all who read (or hear) it' (1985a: 42).

Consequently Kelber emphasizes that in Mark the disciples are depicted as having misunderstood the earthly Jesus so as to be excluded from representing the

risen Lord (1985a: 31). Kelber illustrated this also in his study on Mark 14: 32-42: 'by setting standards over and against the three leading disciples the Markan Jesus discredits the notions of apostolic leadership and succession' (1976: 59-60).

2.2 Orality

The oral and the written Gospel (Kelber 1983) is undoubtedly an important book in which the relationship between oral and written forms of the Gospel traditions are reexamined in the light of relevant research. It grew out of an earlier study (Kelber 1980) in which he attempted to relate studies of oral tradition and oral culture to *Formgeschichte*, and to apply this research to the origins of Mark's Gospel in particular.

In investigating the relationship of speaking and writing in Mark, Paul and Q, Kelber transposes his conclusions about revisionist traditions in early Christianity to the level of linguistic reflection. The study is an attempt at a 'tradition-historical explanation of the Gospel as counterform to an oral tradition fraught with gnosticizing proclivities' (1985a: 41), to show that the written Gospel is a counterform to oral hermeneutics. In terms of theological development, the great divide is not essentially between the earthly Jesus and post-resurrectional Christ. 'The decisive break in the synoptic tradition did thus not come ... with Easter, but when the written medium took full control, transforming Jesus the speaker of kingdom parables into the parable of the kingdom of God' (1983: 220).

At the core of his argument lies the realization that those 'who derive a concept of orality from oral material, and not from written texts, appear to be virtually unanimous in emphasizing a perceptual difference between oral and literate culture' (1980: 20). The insight that orality and textuality (as Kelber phrases it) are incomparably different, forces one to recognize that a 'perceptual chasm separates the oral, associative thinking' of the traditions 'from Mark's causal thinking as it is expressed in his Gospel's sequential pattern' (1980: 29-30). The writing of the Gospel represents a new development in the Jesus traditions; 'a literary mentality has taken control over and restructured oral mentality' (1980: 35). Released from direct audience control, Mark has taken a stand outside or above his source traditions, operating from a literary distance. With Mark 'we witness a breakthrough from collectivity toward individual authorship in the synoptic tradition' (1980: 37). 'Facing his tradition with discrimination, Mark's composition is thus more in conflict than in continuity with his oral past' (1980: 37-8).

Kelber analyses the underlying assumptions of much of current scholarship with regard to the development of the Gospels. He points out that both Bultmann and Gerhardsson, despite obvious differences, share the same conviction of a linear

development in the transmission of Jesus stories. This is quite unacceptable in view of the extensive research done on orality (1983: 14-34). He discusses the basic features of oral transmission, emphasizing that it is a process in which social identification and preventive censorship predominates.

He follows this with an analysis of some of Mark's source traditions, studying the oral syntax and values of the miracle stories and parables, noting the plurality and power of orality.

His examination of the textual Mark further develops his conclusion that Mark was engaged in a polemic against the disciples. Using the irreconcilable differences between the media worlds of oral speech and writing, Mark is seen as criticizing the disciples (and Peter) as representatives of an oral Gospel, which included a sort of glory theology. Mark was the first to impose on the pluralistic and charismatic tradition of the oral transmission the more reflective and harmonious modes of conceptualization that comes with the world of writing. The Markan story 'self-authenticates its new, redemptive medium over against the prevailing authorities of oral transmission' (1983: 130).

A remarkable difference between oral and written Gospel traditions – according to Kelber – is orality's inability to narrate the death of a hero. 'The oral tradition is preoccupied with aspects of the *vita activa* of Jesus and concerned with the presence of hearers, but silent or reticent with regard to Jesus' death. ... the tradition reflects a hermeneutical climate that is anything but favorable to the composition of a passion narrative' (1983: 193 – criticized by Green 1988: 165-169). This is tied up with the opinion that Mark 1-13 stands closer to its oral background than Mark 14-16. The passion narrative 'is a densely plotted narrative' and a clear instance of literary composition out of Old Testament themes (1983: 189-197).

2.3 Paul, Q and John

2.3.1 Paul

If Mark is pictured as a writer opposing oral tradition, Paul is an oral traditionalist opposing writing.

With 'his commitment to oral speech' (1983: 155), Paul is involved in a 'polemic against the Law in terms of an aversion toward the objectified, written word' (1983: 141). Paul's partiality toward oral discourse is clear in the oral analogues that he uses for his Gospel: the description of his revelatory experience resembles that of a prophetic call story (1983: 142); the coming of Jesus is something heard rather than seen (1 Th 4: 15-17), the final resurrection will be affected by the sound of a trumpet (1983: 143), the Gospel according to Paul is constitutionally and operationally

defined in oral terms, not by association with writing and reading: εὐαγγελίζεσθαι, λαλεῖν, καταγγέλειν, κηρύσσειν, βεβαίωσις, ὁμολογία, ἀπολογία, κοινωνία. Paul's written exposition of his Gospel leaves no doubt that when it came alive the Gospel was spoken aloud and, if it is to bring life again, must be *sounded* afresh (1983: 144). 'The force and pervasiveness of auditory analogues in Pauline literature has rarely received adequate theological appreciation, presumably because they are alien to the modern reader of texts' (1983: 143).

Kelber revives the important insights of Julius Schniewind (1910) that λόγος and εὐαγγέλιον should not be associated with doctrine and specific content. Paul has little interest in these aspects as he does not link the word with content but with the effect it has on hearers. The essence of Paul's Gospel is 'dass es gebotschaftet, ausgerichtet wird' (Schniewind 1910: 72). To modern visually oriented logic Paul's claim of oral authority and oral efficacy appears almost magic.

However, an oral synthesis 'creates a tense world of personal loyalties and betrayals' (Kelber 1983: 147). Known and knower are inextricably linked in oral culture: 'a community visited by different apostolic speakers could become fragmented into clusters of shared loyalties' (1983: 147). This underlies the well known spectacle of Corinthian factionalism.

Paul's abiding commitment to the oral Gospel casts fresh light on his polemical stance toward the Law. Focussing mainly on Galatians 3 the curse of the Law is seen in its contrast to the 'personalized communication fostered by the oral Gospel and faith that comes from hearing' (1983: 153). 'Implied in this language is not aversion to the legalistic character of the Law nor skepticism about self-righteous use of it, but a sense of its written totality and complexity' (1983: 153). What commits man to bondage is ἡ γραφή, the Law in its inscribed existence. The Word that is delivered into the hearts of believers, ἡ ἐπαγγελία, in the form of a spoken message opens up to God and creates a sphere of freedom. 'In depth it is not content, but the modality and transformational power of language that discriminates between all that is written down in the book of the Law and the single *logos* of Christ' (1983: 155).

Consequently, analyzing 2 Cor 3: 1-6, the πνεῦμα - γράμμα antithesis is because of the medium dimension. Paul as oral traditionalist reconnects the 'Spirit of the living God' with word in its internal personalizing efficaciousness. The opponents with their divine-man-theology are convinced that the written word serves as carrier of the Spirit. Paul's opposition is not against the Law as legal authority, not the matter of *works*, but 'the objectification of the Law as *gramma*' (1983: 158).

Kelber also addresses Romans 7 with orality versus literacy as hermeneutical key. The basic problem of this famous chapter is the logic of seeing the Law as cognitively valid ('it was the law that made me know what sin is' – vs 7) but soteriologically a failure ('a prisoner to the law of sin' – vs 23). This is because the written Law 'has become unhinged from the oral, participatory lifeworld. It has assumed an existence as verbal artifact It is in this posture of detachment that the Law benefits the quality of perception' (1983: 163). But with writing, salvation has become depersonalized and what results 'is a posture of reflection upon the Law more than engagement in it' (1983: 163). Paul's fundamental disposition is not to teach objectification, but to preach participation (1983: 164).

'Ἡ δικαιοσύνη τοῦ θεοῦ is likewise rooted in the oral matrix. Neither of objective nor of subjective quality, the righteousness of God is an event or an act (Rm 1: 16-17). Paul's articulation of it has all the aspects of oral ontology: verbal, vocal base, efficacious, with present, revelatory force and an universally bonding, unifying potential (1983: 167).

One senses, however, the dilemma: Paul *wrote letters*. So, does his 'employment of the written medium register effects of alienation? Has the disjunctive force of writing entered into the fiber of his theology, producing strains with the oral Gospel?' (1983: 169). Yes, indeed. Paul 'inserts critical limitations to full oral synthesis' (1983: 172). In its very oral functioning his Gospel could be the source of enthusiasm, as happened for example in Thessalonica. In Corinth Paul counters the oral words of wisdom by writing about Jesus' cross. The emphasis on death is a shift in accent in the oral Gospel. 'If this anti-oral emphasis on death were carried to its natural conclusion, one would arrive at the position of Mark who silenced the post-resurrectional Jesus, making it peak in his death and narrating it in opposition to the oral authorities. But Paul ... merely gives us a subtle preview of what was to come with Mark' (1983: 175). When faced with the full consequences of oral hermeneutics (e.g. the Corinthians' superior authority of word - 1 Cor 2: 1) he resolutely grasps the formula γέγραπται γάρ or ἀλλὰ καθὼς γέγραπται (1983: 176). That means that Paul has, occasionally at least, 'activated the powers of the written medium for the purpose of rupturing the oral synthesis' (1983: 177).

2.3.2 The oral hermeneutic of Q

For the basic reconstruction of Q, Kelber accepts the findings of Schulz, Hoffmann and Lührmann (Kelber 1983: 223n70). Q is a sayings Gospel with no reference to the death of Jesus. He goes his own way in seeing Q as representing an oral genre (1983: 201). This fundamentally oral disposition is then correlated with the absence of a passion narrative. The 'oral performance of Q' was the making present of the

exalted Lord, not the historical figure of the past. 'A tradition that focuses on the continuation of Jesus' words cannot simultaneously bring to consciousness what put an end to his speaking. As long as Jesus is perceived as speaking in the present, there is no need, and hardly a possibility, of recapturing the story of his death. By the same logic ... a heavy narrative emphasis on death, such as one finds in Mark, may imply a critique of the sayings tradition' (1983: 201). As a sayings genre Q has no conception of the past. The 'oral, prophetic mode ... united the earthly and the future Son of man into the present efficacious one' (1983: 203).

Mark specifically, with his centering on the past and crucified Messiah, is the calculated reaction to the sayings genre; a 'counter-from' to the hermeneutics of Q. Matthew and Luke continued the impulse: they wanted the prophetically living voice of Jesus to become the unalterable words of past authority. So Kelber concludes that it was precisely Q's oral ontology of language that the Gospel authors – and one may assume the canonizers – perceived to be its 'defect' (1983: 203).

In response to the question of Q, note that Kelber's criticism of traditional *Traditionsgeschichte* undermines the methodological basis on which the identification of Q rests. In other words, if one accepts the criticism of 'the dominant paradigm of linearity' one must realize that that is the exact paradigm underlying most of the research done on the synoptic traditions and specifically on Q. Further, if it is true that scholars have not really grasped what the oral foundations of the synoptic traditions entail, their reconstruction of it must be defective.

With the rejection of the 'original form' concept (Kelber 1980: 33), most of the current reconstruction of pre-Gospel traditions becomes dubious. If the Gospel authors *heard* Q and the other sayings traditions, one cannot possibly apply the concept of an original version in reconstructing them – to cite Kelber's own criticism. It is significant that the disparate estimates of Q forces one 'to think of Q in terms of multiple recensions, multiple documents, or the whole confluence oral and written traditions' (Blomberg 1987: 39) – considerably reducing the analytical value of the hypothesis.

Aside from the many inherent problems of the theory (Petrie 1959; Goulder 1985, and Du Plessis 1988 in connection with Mark's priority) it is quite possible that Luke knew Matthew (or the Matthean traditions) in view of the so-called 'minor agreements', obviating the need for postulating Q. But the point is not so much about Q as about the need for methodological consistency and critical discussion of theoretical validity.

2.3.3 Logocentric metaphysics and the Gospel of John

In a recent article Kelber (1987b) addressed the Gospel of John in terms of the development 'from charismatic speech to narrative Gospel'.

The immense amount of oral material is plainly in sight in John. More specifically the sayings in this Gospel exhibits a pneumatic, oral hermeneutic. Jesus' words are primarily regarded not as carriers of ideas or records of information, but as manifestations of power (1987b: 111). However, John wrote his Gospel 'not to produce an unedited version of oral verbalization, but to recontextualize orality, and to devise a corrective against it' (1987b: 116). Hence his reductive move of the λόγοι to the Λόγος, the authority over the plural λόγοι. 'One may suspect ... a distinctively oral operation of sayings in John's community which caused the evangelist to reach beyond the *logoi*, spoken by or attributed to Jesus, back to the primordial, personified *Logos*' (1987b: 110). 'Seen in these perspectives, it may well seem appropriate that Jesus presides as *Logos* over a narrative that sets standards for oral proclamation and prophetic authority, and revises a Christology and a notion of discipleship that are both deeply rooted in the oral matrix' (1987b: 119).

Some interesting implications are drawn from these perspectives on John. The preexistence of the Word situates him 'prior to the realm of history and outside the reality of the text' (1987b: 119). In other words, Λόγος is an appropriate metaphor for transcendence; constituting 'something of a metaphysical reference point without which world and text are deprived of orientation' (1987b: 119). With this formulation of John's hermeneutic Kelber discusses three schools of thought that are antithetical to Λόγος metaphysics: Rabbinic hermeneutics, New Criticism and the grammatological philosophy of Derrida. 'Having experienced the power of the grammatological tradition, it behooves us to return to the logocentric Gospel, and to relearn its textual valence, its treatment of the *logoi*, and its subordination to the *Logos*' (1987b: 126).

2.4 Parabolic logic and the narrativity of the Gospels

2.4.1 The Gospel as written parable

'If the Gospel is viewed as having arisen out of a process of decontextualization, transformation, and reintegration, we have thereby sketched the history of its textuality but not its new literary identity' (1983: 117).

Kelber sees parable as the generic key to the Gospel of Mark (cf 1983: 215). Parabolic discourse has mainly a riddling, alienating function; it is the very opposite of being instrument of clarification, illustration, illumination. Parables are also open ended.

Three arguments are used as substantiation of seeing Mark as a parabolic story altogether: the *Leitmotif* of kingdom and its metaphorical quality, the insider-outsider dichotomy and the pervasive dynamics of reversal. That Mark has only a few parables in his story is no obstacle. 'Mark employs few and relatively tame parables because he has invested parabolic dynamics in the inclusive Gospel composition' (1983: 219). This links up with his conviction that narrative remains dense and opaque. It reveals in revealing (cf 1988b).

The relationship of Mark to Jesus is briefly discussed. He finds the connection ostensibly in parable logic: 'Both in its narrative form and in its disorienting, metaphorical proclivity canonical Mark operates according to the hermeneutics of Jesus' parables' (1987c: 113). The role that his ideas about Jesus play should however not be underrated. 'Jesus the parabolist is himself not the reassuring foundation of unbroken continuity, and connectedness is not all there is to the tradition he set into motion' (1983: 219). Indeed, if Jesus was the incarnation of revelation, 'he could not himself have been a mere transmitter of tradition' (1983: 219).

2.4.2 The interpretation of narrative

With the ideal to 'promote a general theory of interpretation which seeks to advance hermeneutical reflection on the Gospels' (1987c: 107) Kelber has recently advanced aspects of narrative theory.

He provides us with a 'critical inventory' of five modes of reading the Gospels, using the construction of meaning as organizing principle (1988a). His own preference is quite clear: 'For many of us the change to the narrative logic of the Gospels was an exhilarating experience' (1988a: 131; cf 1979b: 14). Kelber is convinced that neglect of the Gospels' narrativity has been the single most important factor in distorting our reading of them. It is even the answer to deconstruction, for 'by radicalizing the differential quality of language, meaning-as-deferment disallows narrativity to come into its own' (1988a: 135).

Narrative is seen as something with an ontology of its own, not in connection with reality. As interpretation it is artificial. 'Narrative is an artistic production, both promising and withholding, and not a source of natural revelation' (1988a: 130). Consequently, the 'stumbling block to our comprehension of the Gospel narratives remains their narrative emplotment itself' (1988a: 135).

In response I would use his own remark that discussion of critical theory goes beyond method, as 'each mode of reading is informed by certain epistemological and theological claims, ... bound up with differing, often competing assumption' (1988a: 130). Clearly, these are the really interesting and important matters! And

the discussion will only develop when we address them.

Seeing narrative as interpretation standing over and against reality is, in a sense, setting up false alternatives. That our interpretations differ is a problem and not a necessity. Many South Africans are involved in the 'poetic emplotment of incidents and agents', yet experiencing and claiming reality for their histories up to the point of facing death. The essence of texts are not determined by their narrative elements, but by the intention given to it by people. For instance, the essence of history – despite its story likeness, and limitations – is disciplined inquiry of which the goal is knowledge.

3. APPRECIATION

Kelber clearly takes the notion that there were diverse groups within primitive Christianity in tension with each other, even in Palestine, quite seriously. I appreciate how he *specifies* the different traditions. Thus, a major contribution is the raising of awareness of the problem(s) of tradition. He notes that form criticism, despite many methodological inadequacies 'succeeded in alerting us to the significance of the tradition' (1987c: 111). It can confidently be stated that is exactly what Kelber himself has done. More specifically I think he challenges New Testament scholarship with the issue of understanding the Gospel traditions.

A most significant development is an awareness of the 'intersecting worlds of narrative and tradition', that 'the pursuit of narrative meaning is not always and inevitably compromised by explorations into tradition' (Kelber 1988a: 132; 1987c: 121-126).

By far the most important aspect of his work, to my mind at least, is his promotion of taking seriously the features and effects of different communication media. Gager (1974: 249) has remarked that for 'all its prominence as a working hypothesis ... the oral tradition has never received the careful scrutiny which it deserves and needs. Once established, the basic assumptions about the character and behavior of the oral tradition have survived with virtually no review or revision'. Kelber confronted this issue fully.

The importance of seeing the ancient Mediterranean world as basically an oral world and grappling with its implications cannot be overemphasized. 'The oral state of mind and psychological structures so evident in the Bible are strange to us, as we now know, not because we are "Western" but because we are typographic folk' (Ong 1967: 189).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The aims of interpretation

It is a good starting point to define what one has in mind when speaking of 'interpretation'. Interpretation can serve many purposes and mean many things. What is deemed relevant to the interpretative act is partly determined by what one aims for. When criticizing a different interpretation one must attempt some clarity at this level as it explains what one finds perplexing and what not.

Elucidating one's concept of interpretation is an important way of making presuppositions explicit; that is, to define, substantiate and criticize presuppositions. Theories of understanding and semantics, theory of texts and the purposes that research serve are all instances of what determines the context in which a study has meaning (for an illustration of the principle, cf Schmidt 1983).

I see the purpose of interpreting a text as the discovery of the communicative event. Communication is the fundamental activity of being human, that is, the making manifest of an informative intention to others, in the sense of producing and interpreting evidence (the literature is vast; see Sperber & Wilson 1986 for a discussion). 'Informative intention' is meant in a broad sense. We use language for much of the time to symbolize experience, to transform experience symbolically and give meaning to it in our interaction with others.

More specifically, my concern for construing communicative event is due to a historical interest. Speaking very broadly interpretation usually restricts itself either to texts or to events. There are many important reasons for bearing in mind the differences and the different concepts of 'meaning' in each case. My concern would not be the texts as such, but that they are 'instruments' to the worlds in which people lived and died. Consequently the value of the enterprise is the interpretation of existence.

This should not be seen as a plea for the resurrection of historical positivism, but to show that what one aims for determines the methodological issues and controls what is relevant 'evidence'. An instance is the use of the so-called *intentional fallacy* by New Testament scholars as a criticism against historical research. Wimsatt has argued that 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art' (1954: 3). It is obvious that the value of art *as art* cannot be determined by analysis of its genesis. Concern for the art of the Gospels creates interest in (re-)experiencing their aesthetic meaning. One must be careful not to mix activities and/or conclusions *without argument*.

There is a tendency to identify historical criticism (as New Testament scholars

know it) with historical research. Historical study is not so much the employment of a procedure – of which most categories are literary anyway – as an interpretive stance (Graff 1987: 2; cf Craffert 1989). Furthermore, the idea that history is the collecting of dry-as-dust ‘facts’ and therefore – in New Testament research – positivistic by nature is wrong. Keep in mind that historical knowledge is involved in *all* interpretation, whether addressed or not. *Some* idea of or perspective on a historical context always plays a part in understanding. In this sense I will claim that New Testament scholarship is a long way off from being proficiently historical.

This argument presupposes the importance of historical understanding. It judges origins as constitutive for evaluating and understanding an utterance’s *Wirkungsgeschichte*. It also assumes a respect for other people and what *they* were up to. The point, once again, is not so much to say what interpretation must be about, as to emphasize the need for arguing why it *can* or *should* be so.

To illustrate the importance of describing the purpose of interpretation: central to Kelber’s reasoning is the juxtaposing of the oral versus the written medium. Without diminishing the obvious role of medium, it is but a *medium* mediating something between persons. It is in principle possible to communicate anything in any medium. Seen from the point of communication there is no fundamental reason why a medium cannot convey what any other medium can. Narrative competence is not necessarily connected with textuality. The point is not about appropriateness but about possibility.

The ever-present role of historical context demands an immense investment in historical research. Kelber’s reconstruction of besieged Jerusalem is based on a straightforward reading of Josephus. Nothing is made of reading Josephus critically, no extra-literary sources are utilized. I detect the same negligence as regards possible historical contexts when it comes to the orality-literacy conflict, with little use of comparative materials. Graff (1987: 17) has criticized many discussions about literacy for their ignorance of the vital role of socio-historical context; a criticism clearly relevant to discussions of orality (see the exploratory investigation of Mk 15: 40-16: 8 – Botha 1989).

Downing, in several works, has challenged New Testament scholarship to approach our documents with the suppositions and ideas that *their* audiences would have had; ‘a painstaking attention to what their contemporaries were able to “hear”, an attention we need to emulate if we are to hope ourselves to understand the first Christians’ attempts to communicate and if we are to share and enrich our understanding with others’ (1985: 116; cf 1981; 1987: 8-32).

4.2 Conflicting traditions in early Christianity

According to Kelber, in the Markan community the Jewish Christians are claiming Jesus as their authority; so is Mark. The Jewish Christians, obviously, falsified the Jesus traditions. Mark, on the other hand, is 'a creative reconsideration of the past of Jesus so as to be of immediate service to the present of Mark' (1974: 131). We are confronted with the problem of determining who is in the right. In principle both are doing the same thing, changing 'traditions' with the eye on contemporization, desiring 'to remain in living attachment to Jesus and to preserve continuity between Jesus and the ... community of followers' (1974: 5).

Independent of the correctness of Kelber's analysis one must face up to the issue of *competing* traditions present in early Christianity. How would one go about evaluating the different traditions? Kelber specifically contrasts Mark's interpretation with that of his predecessors. The emphasis on discontinuity raises the problem of the reliability and correctness of *any one tradition* as it was Christian traditions that created or became part of the problems.

In Kelber's analysis Mark appears decidedly more acceptable than either the power hungry and zealous Jewish Christians, or the gnosticizing orally-minded prophets. Is it because Mark is part of the canon that his viewpoint is more valid? The implicit appeal to the canon aggravates the problem as the criteria for the canonizers were, amongst others, continuity and the presence of the voice of the living Lord! Strangely, some of the first readers of Mark attempted to subvert Mark: Matthew and Luke promptly reinstated the disciples. Interestingly, Mark's historicizing with a disregard for accuracy makes him a powerful force, in modern terms, for promoting gnosticised Christianity.

Kelber's reconstruction of conflict presupposes things such as normative Judaism, a consciousness of Christian self-identity, and a developed sense of the importance of their creeds among early Christians. Without serious historical investigation, conceptualizing contexts becomes highly unreliable, making the texts ambiguous. Consequently, given this ambiguity of the textual references there is almost no end to the scenarios of conflict which may be imagined.

4.3 Orality

What is needed is a sense of how ancient (read orally determined) writers actually operated: how ancient hermeneutics worked. Without this it is easy to imagine conflict where there is none. One easily falls into the trap of 'media eisegesis' (Boomershine 1987: 65).

How can oral texts be identified? In Kelber's exposition Paul's *written* texts are basically oral in nature, in continuity with oral dynamics, but Mark's Gospel is only

reminiscent of orality and basically *literary* in thrust and in conflict with oral hermeneutics. Ironically, he notes the difficulties in arguing from a text to the oral traditions behind it, but does not address the identification of traditions themselves. The conclusions of other scholars are cited (based – as they are – on errant assumptions).

There are differences in consciousness between orality and literacy (see, with different perspectives, Tannen 1982; Akinasso 1982a; 1982b; 1985; Finnegan 1988 for an overview of the issues and problems involved). However, one should not think of orality and literacy as forces in themselves. We should picture cultures; a predominantly oral and a predominantly literate culture (formed by *printing*) as the opposite poles with a vast range of possibilities in between. Kelber takes these differences and interprets them as opposing forces within the New Testament.

He is confusing the ability to read and write with literacy itself. Literacy, as he claims Mark's writing to be exemplary of, simply did not exist in a pre-technological society, except to a very limited extent in the upper classes. 'Writing arrived as an extension of speech; it was print that offered a substitute for speech' (Smith 1986: 183). Kelber collapses many centuries of development (from full scale orality to literacy) into the 30 years before AD 70. To most writers of antiquity the situation is rather one of writing and hearing than writing and reading: 'the texture of scribal culture was so thin that heavy reliance was placed on oral transmission even by literate elites' (Eisenstein 1983: 7). As writing was part of ancient society (e.g. it is quite probable that even Jesus was literate, Safrai 1976: 950) the more relevant comparative 'cultural' aspects should be folklore, and not primary orality.

4.4 Interpreting the Gospel of Mark

An important facet of Kelber's thinking is his view of Mark as polemic writing. It is not so much the possibility of reading Mark as polemical as the need to read the textual clues in a specific manner that raises questions.

Mark's literary genius is a traditional bone of contention. If Mark took such meticulous care in formulating his story, why the many narrative inconsistencies? Why the extremely complex way of saying that the Jewish Christians are wrong in their appeal to the risen Lord? The problem persists even with regard to the oral-written conflict. That the Gospels are 'unique' is not at stake (for otherwise they would have been exact duplicates of other texts), but what is special, relevantly distinctive about them? Despite our (valid) reactions against the view of the Gospels as *Kleinliteratur* better alternatives still have to be found. We are using inappropriate categories; we should find different terminology to articulate the questions Mark poses.

'The first genuinely popular writing we encounter in Greek is to be found in the basic monuments of Christianity. The ... New Testament ... envisaged a much simpler and infinitely wider audience than had ever been addressed in writing before.... early Christian writers disregarded forms which limited both expression and audience and wrote as ordinary people spoke' (Hadas 1950: 266). Hence my emphasis on reading the Gospels, or at least Mark, against the background of the world of folklore.

I view Mark as an oral Gospel surviving in written form. Although we know it only as a written text it originated, existed at first and had its first major importance in a context that was basically oral. One should 'read' it as a communication event within a spoken situation, as a casual transcription of what had been performed orally (Kloppenborg 1987: 36 – on Kelber's views of Q; cf also Theissen 1983: 189-195; Boomershine 1987; Dewey 1989). Against this background Mark is probably a type of *hero tradition* (in the sense of Raglan 1965); the cross redefining heroism (cf Farrel 1987: 41-42). This perspective satisfies the problem raised by the many links with ancient biography noticed in current Gospel research and highlights Mark's individual characteristics.

It seems to me that the dumbness of the disciples is rather typical of oral composition. The excellent teacher 'needs' inept students. As spoken words personify and encourage participation in the message, not reflection on it, the problem of the disciples not hearing the message from the young man becomes irrelevant, a typographic problem, so to speak.

Whereas Kelber sees the writing of the Gospel as a reaction against the so-called oral authorities (the people transmitting the Jesus stories orally) I would defend the thesis that Mark (the author) was *one of these oral authorities*. His 'writing' should be 'read' and interpreted as a text so involved with the oral medium that mere reciprocity is inadequate. It is – even as a written text – basically an oral performance; especially when seen historically, as a communication act within an oral context.

Kelber has responded to the possibility of interpreting textual Mark as orally oriented, by quoting the (apparent) lack of stories narrating a hero's full career from birth to death in oral traditions (1987a: 100). But that is not quite true of Mark as it is a very incomplete account of Jesus' career. Kelber also strongly emphasizes that the Gospels 'as texts can and do in fact enjoy the stability of documented existence' (1987a: 101). True enough, but the fact that Mark can be read as such is not yet that it must be read in this way; and so the call is for clarification of the why.

4.5 Narrative and story

In contemporary theorizing on interpretation there is wide spread concern about narrativity. This is reflected in Kelber's recent considerations on interpreting the Gospels. Narrativity is an immensely complicated subject, and I do not for one moment doubt the formidable contributions of Wayne Booth, Kenneth Burke, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, Frank Kermode and Paul Ricoeur (to name but a few). Some reservations toward a straightforward adoption of their insights can be expressed, however, even if only as challenge to clarification and further research.

One finds an amazing stress on *form*. Form determines what can be said and what not, form determines conceptual worlds (Kelber 1985a: 32). From this perspective the Gospel's narrativity determines its interpretation. This is probably due to seeing narrative both as something 'out there', something substantial in itself with its own 'laws' and effects and, closely related, as something unconnected to the real world, synthetic, an imposition on reality.

There seems to be confusion in the understanding of the concepts 'narrative' and 'story'. Narrativity is not yet story, although it might be a prominent feature of it. There is no such thing as a narrative in itself: we have narratives used for story purposes, historical purposes, educational purposes; an almost endless list. Interpretation demands genre concepts. One determines whether a text is story (fictional), or story about supposedly real events (the fictive character of all history does not imply that nothing can be said about the past); or whatever is the appropriate category. Narrative is not a genre. Imagine a judge claiming that a testimony is *narrative*, the 'logic of history' and 'external events' are irrelevant as 'it must be true to itself'. Academic enterprise cannot be that strange to common experience.

Setting up narrative as something in itself – different from reality – misjudges the reciprocity between *Ding-an-sich* and interpretation. I am quite aware of the immense complexities, but want to emphasize the both-and character of knowledge/interpretation and reality. It is something we assume and act on from day to day. The sheer extent of the matter relativizes its impact. And most importantly, narrative and history should not be set up against each other as 'we are *in* history as we are *in* the world: it serves as the horizon and background for our everyday experience' (Carr 1986: 4; cf also Munz 1977).

There can be no meaning or understanding whatsoever without context: by saying one reads it in terms of itself is merely substituting one historical construction of context for another. Think about the immense amount of extra-textual material needed simply to follow the story of Mark.

Kelber has also responded to an one-sided stress on narrativity at the cost of tradition, claiming a sort of middle position (1987a: 101; 1988: 131). His emphasis on the autonomy of texts – especially Mark – belies this. Narrative, to him, is something opaque, yet astoundingly creative. A narrative is a kind of special object requiring unusually conscientious study by which significances, even mysteries, are to be discerned.

5. CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Undoubtedly one of the most attractive features of Kelber's work is his interdisciplinary research. However, this sort of enterprise has some very complex consequences.

Contemporary views on the nature and aims of scientific enquiry (cf Bernstein 1983: 34-49, 223-231; Böhme 1975) make an argument for the necessity and importance of interdisciplinary study almost superfluous. The quest for meaningful answers and significant discussion have become highly complex undertakings. We have become familiar with the futility of basing things we argue for and believe relevant to others on 'common sense'. There are so many opinions and decisions involved that we cannot possibly support them all with personally examined evidence and the inwardly compelling logic that 'common sense' implies. 'Good reasons' presuppose expert authority. We move out of the familiar and into other disciplines to develop relevant expertise, credentialism, and autonomy.

But, to adapt a remark of Carney (1975: 37), 'the price ... is eternal vigilance'. On a general level the problem of claiming expertise is the ability it gives to legitimize ideology. Only by a truly critical awareness can we escape the seductive power of 'expertise' which all too easily gives quantitative expression to differences of rank and fosters an illusion of continuity with dearly held beliefs (see Larson 1984). Interdisciplinary research can just as easily become a strategy of confirmation, instead of a critical tool.

It is obvious that an interdisciplinary approach must be eclectic. Not only the vast amount of literature and studies forces this, but also the subject matter itself: one needs to adapt and develop possibilities. One's criteria will therefore by necessity be functional: its appropriateness to one's hypotheses and its value for resolving problems. However, that is not the final word, as an eclectic piecemeal functionalist approach can be disastrous, especially in leading to conceptual fragmentation (Tiryakian 1985: 1139). The critical rigour lies in achieving and maintaining a balance between historical precision and theoretical sophistication

and integration.

What is involved in 'being critical'?

As a foundation there should be an extensive awareness of philosophical reflection so that one can recognize epistemological frameworks and understand 'paradigms'. Too easily aspects are transposed from contexts that completely alter their meaning.

'Human perception is selective, limited, culture-bound and prone to be unaware that it is any or all of the above. The cognitive maps with which we select, sort and categorize complex data interpose themselves between events and our interpretation of them whether we like it or not. The only real question, therefore, may be whether we choose to raise this process to a conscious level and examine it or prefer to leave our biases alone' (Rohrbaugh 1987: 23). Rohrbaugh wrote in the context of the necessity of using models; the principle is the same for what interdisciplinary research can and should do.

Finally, clarity about our aims is required. The aim of interpretation can definitely not simply be conglomerating masses of information; the adding together of disparate materials.

To ask better questions is undoubtedly the great issue facing New Testament scholars. I would like to see amongst the criteria for this the quest for being more humane, the search for what it is to be human. In order to do this one has to take up the challenge of multi-disciplinary studies.

It is in this regard that we should join Kelber in investigating the traditions about Jesus from Nazareth. This will be well served by exploring the hermeneutics of orality – both as a wider context for understanding the way in which the texts of early Christianity are different and more specifically in developing more appropriate concepts for the analysis of Mark.

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