

# A HISTORY OF BIBLICAL NARRATION

By Tom Boomershine

While the Biblical storytelling tradition has largely been silenced, Biblical narratives have continued to be recited and interpreted throughout the history of the Church. In this sense, the Biblical storytelling tradition has been transformed and continued. In order to understand our present situation, therefore, it may be helpful to draw a sketch of this story. The limits of a sketch are that it seeks only to draw some relatively tentative outlines of a picture which can be revised and completed in a more detailed manner at a later time. This is particularly the case with a history as vast and complex as the history of Biblical narration over the last 3000 years.

The history of Biblical narration can be sketched in relation to the history of media. Walter Ong's concept of the sensorium will provide the framework for our journey through time. According to Ong, the word, the basic element of human communication, stands in an ever-changing relationship to the various senses of the body. In its original form, the word is an extension of the mouth that is perceived by the ear. The most important and far reaching transformation of the word has been the transition from the word as speech to the word as writing in manuscript and then print. With the development of electronic media, the word is an electronic impulse transformed into secondary sound or into printed words on a computer. However, the relationships between the various media of the word - oral, manuscript, printed text, sound recording, TV, and computer - are complex and in constant flux. Thus, the identification of those shifting relationships through the history of culture can be described as a sensorium. The sensorium of a particular culture is "the total sensory apparatus of a culture as an operational complex."<sup>1</sup> With the development of new media, a new sensorium comes into being. This sensorium provides the context within the Biblical narrative tradition is continued.

Our attention will be focused on the sensorium of Biblical narrative within the general pattern of media history. We will want to note the characteristic occasion in which Biblical narratives have been experienced and the style in which the stories have been presented. Moreover, memory and the expression of feeling are central aspects of the sensorium of Biblical narrative that have been transformed during the development of the various forms of Biblical narration.

There is also a close connection between media change and patterns of community organization. Media are both an extension of the individual and a matrix of relationships between people. Every new medium of mass communication creates new patterns of community organization. From literary societies to the virtual cults around rock and roll groups such as the Beatles to the electronic church, we are surrounded by communities organized around media worlds. In a similar manner, we need to identify the basic patterns of community organization that have developed around each of the media in which the Biblical narrative tradition has been communicated.

Furthermore, every interpreter of Biblical narrative must find a way to make connections between the narratives and the ways of thinking of the persons to whom the narratives are being presented. The changes in the characteristic mode of interpretation will, therefore, be a further element in the media mix to be identified. Finally, we will make some observations about the characterization or description of God that is distinctive in each period of Biblical narration.

## The Media of Biblical Narration

There have been three basic periods in the media history of the word: oral, written, and electronic. The Scriptures were developed in the sensorium of oral culture and then were written down. Within the sensorium of the written word, there have been two major changes. The development of the printing press in the 15th century made possible the mass distribution of the Scriptures and the development of private reading on a mass scale. The other major change has been the gradual evolution from the 17th through the 19th centuries of reading in silence rather than reading aloud as the dominant means of perceiving a printed Biblical text. We now stand at the beginning of a new age in the history of Biblical narration. A sketch of the basic patterns of change in the sensorium of Biblical narrative may make it possible to identify the steps into the future.

However, it is essential to recognize that these media ages are in no sense exclusive alternatives. As we have seen, previous media do not cease to exist. Instead, in each new age a new media mix is created. But, while the media of a previous age do not disappear, their role and often their value changes. Thus, the storytellers of a tribe do not disappear after the introduction of writing. But their roles are often radically transformed as they are demoted from positions of power to little more than an anachronism.

Thus, in relation to Biblical narrative, all of the forms of Biblical narration that have been developed in the past are still present today. Bible stories are still told to children. Biblical narratives are read aloud in public worship from written manuscripts, are read aloud in small groups and by individuals, and are studied as texts in silence. Thus, when a new medium of Biblical narration is introduced, the old patterns are not eliminated. Instead, the functions of particular types of Biblical narration change and continue to coexist in new relationships. The development of writing and the subsequent reading of Biblical stories from texts has not eliminated Biblical storytelling, nor will the development of electronic media eliminate the patterns of the interpretation of Biblical narrative in the media world of silent print. But each new medium has created a transformation and reevaluation of the previous forms of Biblical narration.

A note of humility needs to be sounded before we begin this short but epic journey through time. The media history of Biblical narration is an enormous subject with vast complexities. This is no sense a critical history. These observations about the history of Biblical narration are offered as tentative conclusions that will need to be revised in light of more comprehensive data. My hope is that this sketch will make it possible for us to understand the past and the future of Biblical storytelling more fully. But at best it is a first step in a much longer journey.

## Biblical Narration in Oral Culture

I have a vivid memory of Professor Samuel Terrien's account of storytelling in the Bedouin tribe with whom he lived for a time. He told the story with sparkling eyes, the *joie de vivre* that characterized his French accent, and expansive gestures. Every evening after supper the men would gather around the campfire. Amidst the rattling of pans in the background, various musical instruments would appear as if by magic from those wonderfully flowing robes. And as they began to play, the storyteller of the tribe would begin to tell the tribe's stories. There would be a story of

the creation of the world and of the patriarchs such as Abraham. There would be stories of Israel and of the prophets, including Jesus of Nazareth. Always, there were stories about Mohammed and the life of Islam. Then, there might be stories of the Crusades or the Turks. Stories of the First World War and of Lawrence of Arabia were often told. And there were stories of the recent experiences of the tribe. Throughout this period of several hours, everyone would play along and rock back and forth, participating fully in the telling of the stories. Finally, sometime in the early morning, everyone would become quiet and the storyteller would begin a new story. If the story went well, he would continue. But, if not, he would stop and return to a familiar story. After a few more stories, the group would quietly break up and go to bed for the remainder of the night.

An evening campfire is a typical occasion for storytelling in an oral culture. In addition to the tribal campfire, the Biblical tradition also reflects occasions of storytelling in the family. It was the obligation of every father to tell the stories of the traditions of Israel to his children (e.g., Ex. 12:24; Joshua 4:6). Another occasion is cultic worship, as is reflected in the required recital of the Exodus tradition at the bringing of the first fruits in Deuteronomy 26: "A wandering Aramean was my father."

Storytelling was not, however, only a small group activity in the traditions of Israel. The recital of God's actions in the life of the people was also a practice at the covenant renewal festivals of the people of Israel. This tradition is reflected in Joshua 24, which records the story of the formation of the tribal amphictyony or confederation at Shechem from the original twelve tribes. As the central rite of this solemn occasion, Joshua recited the story of the actions of God in behalf of the people (Joshua 24:2-15). Joshua's story includes the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the exodus, and the battles of the conquest. This account probably reflects the tradition of recital of the sacred traditions at the gatherings of the nation for covenant renewal.

In the Gospel accounts of the teaching of Jesus, another characteristic storytelling occasion was reflected, namely, storytelling in educational settings. Jesus told stories to great crowds and to his disciples as a means of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, the Gospels record several occasions in which Jesus imaginatively retold some of the stories of Israel during conflicts with the religious authorities. Thus, during his conflict with the Pharisees about working on the Sabbath, Jesus tells the story of David eating the shew bread. (Mark 2:25-26) Mark also reports Jesus' retelling of Isaiah's parable of the vineyard. (Mark 12:1-11) Many of the sermons in Acts, including Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7) and Paul's sermon in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13), are storytelling sermons which recount the stories of Israel and culminate with the account of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God. The Gospel traditions themselves were certainly recited in the gatherings of the community for worship. And Eusebius records that the Gospels were a primary form of preaching in early Christianity:<sup>2</sup>

a great light of religion shone on the minds of the hearers of Peter, so that they were not satisfied with a single hearing or with the unwritten teaching of the divine proclamation, but with every kind of exhortation besought Mark, whose Gospel is extant, seeing that he was Peter's follower, to leave them a written statement of the teaching given them verbally, nor did they cease until they had persuaded him, and so became the cause of the Scripture called the

Gospel according to Mark...Clement quotes the story in the sixth book of the Hypotyposes, and the bishop of Hierapolis, named Papias confirms him ••• They say that this Mark was the first to be sent to preach in Egypt the Gospel which he had also put into writing, and was the first to establish churches in Alexandria itself.

Regardless of the credibility of this account of the authorship of Mark's Gospel, this description of the use of the Gospel in evangelistic preaching in Egypt confirms, at the very least, that Clement, Papias, and Eusebius all found this to be a believable report of the telling of the Gospel stories. And, just as the ancient tradition of storytelling around a campfire is continued in the oral culture of the Arabian desert, so also the tradition of Gospel storytelling as a means of proclamation of the Gospel is continued in Africa, India, and southeast Asia.

Finally, according to Origen, the Gospel stories were used by the early Church in healings and exorcisms. In his treatise, Against Celsus, in which he defended the practices of the Church against the criticisms of pagan philosophers who sought to affirm the traditions of Rome, Origen states:<sup>3</sup>

...it is not by incantations that Christians seem to prevail (over evil spirits) but by the name of Jesus, accompanied by the announcement of the narratives which relate to him; for the repetition of these has frequently been the means of driving demons out of men, especially when those who repeated them did so in a sound and genuinely believing spirit. (I.vi)

Two elements of Origen's report are of particular interest. First, Origen distinguishes the recital of Biblical narratives from magic and the repetition of magical formulas. And second, an element of that difference is the spirit in which the storytellers tell the story. As we shall see, these same elements continue to be essential features as well as dangers of Biblical storytelling.

Thus, the people of Israel and the early Church used storytelling in a wide variety of contexts. The common elements in all of these storytelling occasions were: 1) a storyteller telling a story from memory; 2) an audience listening to and participating in the story in a variety of ways; 3) a story whose explicit content is the action of God as revealed to the people of Israel and the early Church. The storytelling events took place in virtually every part of the life of the communities, which eventually recorded their favorite and most important stories in the Scriptures. Storytelling was an extremely portable and adaptable form of speech for the people of Israel and early Christianity.

The style in which the Biblical stories were told can only be inferred from the character of the narratives themselves and from storytelling styles in cultural situations that are analogous to the oral culture of the Biblical period. Amos Wilder has drawn together a wide range of this circumstantial evidence and his description of the style of Biblical storytelling is indicative:

...when we picture to ourselves the early Christian narrators we should make full allowance for animated and expressive narration ... Oral speech also was less inhibited than today... When we think of the early church meetings and testimonies and narrations we are probably well guided if we think of the way in which Vachel Lindsay read or of the appropriate readings of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*.<sup>4</sup>

Wilder's conclusions coincide with the results of recent research. In oral culture, the basic style of storytelling is highly expressive. The stories are often chanted in a highly expressive manner with broadly expansive gestures.

Related to the question of style is the issue of emotional expression and the communication of feelings. A common characteristic of all storytelling traditions is the evocation of emotional involvement in the story through the direct expression of the feelings associated with the story. A high degree of emotional spontaneity is also common. Depending on the mood of the group and the storyteller, there may be a wide range of emotions in a storytelling event, even in different tellings of the same story. If the story goes well and the audience does get involved in the story, the telling of the story becomes an event. As a result of the telling of the story in this electric atmosphere, new things happen in the group and for individuals. The event reported in the story happens again through the telling of the story. Thus, the style invites involvement. While the storyteller projects a high degree of energy, there are also steady invitations to become involved in the telling. Modes of audience participation vary as do modes of telling. Sometimes the audience sings or hums along or plays an instrument, as Terrien reported. But, regardless of the style of participation, the audience's involvement provides energy and encouragement for the storyteller.

Thus, the style of Biblical storytelling was probably highly emotional and a high degree of audience participation was encouraged. This is reflected in the ritual actions of participation in storytelling that are characteristic of both the Passover seder and the Eucharist. The stories were also told in an atmosphere of spontaneity; improvisation was both encouraged and rewarded by the interest and response of the audience. The variations on a storytelling theme that are omnipresent in the Gospels are signs of this aspect of the storytelling tradition. And through it all, there was the sheer delight of the act of telling the story itself. It is no coincidence that the storytellers of the early Church called the stories of Jesus euangelion, good news.

In storytelling, the storyteller tells the story without a script and, therefore, from memory. But the character of memory in oral cultures is different than word for word recital of a memorized text.

The creative and imagination function of memory in oral cultures has been made clear by recent studies of storytelling in oral cultures of the 20th century. The now classic study in this field was done by Millman Perry and his student, Albert Lord. Lord was a specialist in Homer. In response to controversy about the frequent repetitions in Homeric poetry, Lord went to Yugoslavia and studied the practice of Yugoslavian singers of tales. He hoped to prove that the frequent repetitions in Homeric poetry were a typical characteristic of oral poetry, which is composed as it is performed. Perry died before his research was completed. Lord then finished the task and published the results of their study. Their work has shed new light on the character of memory in oral culture.

When they asked the Yugoslav folk singers about the degree of similarity between different performances of the same poem, their answer was that every performance was exactly the same, word for word. But when they recorded different performances, they found that there were great variations. Their basic discovery was that these songs, like jazz compositions, were composed anew at each performance.

Lord summarized the patterns of change in the transmission of the tradition as follows:<sup>5</sup>

When we look... over... examples of transmission, we are, I believe, struck by the conservativeness of the tradition. The basic story is carefully preserved. Moreover, the changes fall into certain clear categories, of which the following emerge: (1) saying the same thing in fewer or more lines, because of singer's methods of line composition and of linking lines together, (2) expansion of ornamentation, adding of details of description (that may not be without significance), (3) changes of order in a sequence ••• (4) addition of material not in a given text of the teacher, but found in texts of other singers in the district, (5) omission of material, and (6) substitution of one theme for another, in a story configuration held together by inner tensions.

Thus, the singers did not memorize the stories word-for-word at all. It was clearly inappropriate to expect verbal identity between different performances, even if the singers and many listeners could argue categorically that such identity was present.

Two elements of the tradition remained consistently the same and, therefore, comprised the remembered material: the story line and the formulas. As Lord observed, the conservatism of the tradition is evident in the repetition of the story line of each song. While Some materials might be added or omitted, the basic story line is always preserved.

The second element of memorized material was the most significant for Perry's hypothesis.

The songs were composed spontaneously by the repetition and adaptation of formulas. The singers had each mastered a common stock of set phrases, which provided the means for formulating the themes of their tales. These formulas varied in length from four to ten syllables and covered the full range of subject matter. These are some representative formulas as In a particular song:<sup>6</sup>

With "By Allah" she mounted her horse;  
She implored the white horse:  
"Hail, whitey, falcon's wing!  
Raiding has been your work;  
Ever has Mujo raided.  
Lead me to the city of Kajnida!  
I know not the road to the city of Kajnida!"  
It was a beast and could not talk,  
But the stead knew many things.

These formulas were found more than once in about 12,000 lines of one singer and indicate the types of formulas that are used in one song.

The Yugoslav singers of tales learn the formulas naturally, over a period of years, by listening to the tales and gradually building a repertoire of story lines and formulas. From this material, the stories are spontaneously recomposed at each telling. On the basis of this evidence, Lord and Parry argued that the existence of similar formulas in Homeric poetry was the result of oral composition by ancient singers of the Homeric poems who learned and composed the poems in the same manner.

Ruth Finnegan has shown that memorization and word-for-word reproduction are sometimes present in oral culture, notably among the Somali in the Horn of Africa and folk performers in the Anglo-American tradition.<sup>7</sup> That is, memorization for recital can be involved in the formation of oral tradition. But, as Finnegan states, "To admit the possibility of memorization in oral literature is not to go back to the idea of passive reception from memorized 'tradition.'<sup>8</sup> Memory in storytelling is, therefore, a highly complex and creative process which involves both the memorization of traditional materials and the use of those materials in the process of creative composition.

While it cannot at this point in Biblical research be demonstrated that a similar pattern of oral composition was used in the telling of Biblical stories, it is probable that the character of the memorization of the stories had at least some of the characteristics of memory discovered by Lord and Parry. At the very least, this research has made it clear that memorization in oral culture is not primarily a matter of word for word memorization and transmission of a fixed tradition.

As we have discussed above, a primary function of memory in storytelling is the directness and immediacy of communication that results from a story being told from one person to another. The story is told from the mind of the storyteller. Furthermore, in the context of telling the story, memorization facilitates spontaneous development of the story in response to the dynamics of the particular storytelling event.

Thus, in oral culture, memory has an essential role in storytelling that extends far beyond the mere task of preservation and transmission of the tradition. Memory is a natural process of internalization directly analogous to a child's learning a language. It makes possible the creative retelling of the story.

In addition to its role in the performance of the stories, another dimension of the role of memory in oral culture is the formation of the communal memory. The recital of stories in the gatherings of the community creates a common memory that binds the community together. While certain individuals may be responsible for the performance of the stories on particular occasions, many persons know the stories and can tell them.

The process by which the communal memory is formed has a close relationship to the patterns of community organization. The characteristic patterns of community organization during the oral period were the family, the tribe, and the cultic centers located in various places around the countryside. In each place, the unit of social organization was determined by the number of people who could listen to one person's voice. This limit was stretched to its utmost in the organization of the twelve tribes. Thus, when Joshua sought to create a new structure of organization through forming an alliance or amphycion of the twelve tribes, he recited the story of the acts of God in the exodus and the conquest of Canaan (Joshua 24). Recent sociological study of this period has raised the possibility that the process here was far more than a simple recalling of the stories which all twelve tribes knew in common. Rather, many of the tribes may have been residents of the area who were only loosely associated with the exodus traditions. Furthermore, there may have been some Canaanites who were assimilated into the tribes of Israel who only vaguely knew the traditions. By reciting this story, Joshua accomplished two objectives: 1) he made clear that the organizing center of the covenant would be

loyalty to the God who had done these mighty deeds on behalf of his people; and 2) he began the process of the formation of the communal memory. The tribes continued to be the dominant form of social organization in Israel until the formation of Israel as a nation state under Saul and David. And, while the causal relationships are unclear, this may have been the period in which the traditions of the Pentateuch were first drawn together in a written form by the editor known as the Yahwist. If so, the formation of a new pattern of social organization happened at the same time as the introduction of the first change in the medium of narration of the tribes' traditions.

In early Christianity, a new community was formed around the telling of the stories of Jesus. The patterns of community organization in early Christianity appear to have been small congregations or house churches (e.g., I Cor. 15:19; Philemon 1:2). Once again, the primary unit of the community was a relatively small group. This community included Gentiles as well as Jews. In a radically different cultural context than that of Joshua, a similar process can be observed: community formation through identification with a story of the actions of God in Israel. An extended family unit, whether it is formed biologically or by identity with a common story, appears to have been the basic unit of both social organization and oral communication in Israel and in early Christianity.

The issue which the interpreter of Biblical narratives faces in every age is how to connect the experience of people in a subsequent age with the experience of the original event. And in oral culture, the basic method of interpretation was to retell the story in relation to the issues and experiences of the period in which the story was being retold. Examples of this method of interpretation are present in virtually all the narrative literature of the Bible.

For example, a basic conclusion of research on the Pentateuch has been the literature was retold at least four times by different editors. The Yahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist, and the priestly writer reinterpreted the traditions of the Exodus and the conquest in the context of the issues of their time. To cite a concrete example, the Priestly writer retold the story of the creation by adding Genesis 1, in which the importance of the observance of the Sabbath is emphasized by the account of Yahweh resting on the seventh day. Throughout the Priestly retelling of the Pentateuchal traditions, this theme recurs in relation to the observance of the sacrificial cult, the laws about Sabbath, etc. In the Deuteronomic interpretation of the tradition, great emphasis is given to the cleanliness codes. These are clearly interpretations of the traditional stories in relation to the issues of a community that lived several centuries later. There was, after all, no issue of Sabbath observance in the garden of Eden. But in the community of exiles living in Babylonia after the destruction of the Temple, the observance of the Sabbath became the most distinctive mark of Jewish religious practice. Thus, the interpreters of the narratives who lived in the oral period made connections between the ancient story and the experience of their time by retelling the story.

The same process is followed in the formation of the Gospel tradition. Each of the evangelists retold the stories of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection as their way of making the stories meaningful to persons who lived from forty to seventy years later. Matthew retold the stories in relation to the issues faced by a Jewish-Christian community while Luke dealt more explicitly with the interpretation of the Gospel in the broader world of the Roman Empire.

An example of this process in miniature is the description of the roof in the story of the healing of the paralytic. In Mark, the report is that the men tore a hole in the roof, which implies that the roof was made of mud and sticks (as in Mark 2:4). When Luke later retold the story, he reported that they let the man down with his bed "through the tiles" (Luke 5:19), thus retelling the story in terms of the construction practices of a later period, when roofs were made of tiles rather than mud and sticks. But, in each instance, the story was interpreted by retelling the story. Thus, John's major reinterpretation of the Gospel tradition was carried out by retelling the stories. He added, for example, a series of discourses in which Jesus speaks in a style that is radically different than Jesus' mode of speech in the Synoptics. But this reinterpretation of the Gospel tradition was done by weaving the discourses into a comprehensive retelling of the Gospel stories.

This process of retelling Biblical narratives in relation to new situations is a form of thinking. Even though it is unfamiliar to our way of thinking, the realization that retelling is a form of interpretation is necessary to an understanding of the Biblical narrative tradition. When the storytellers of Israel and early Christianity retold the stories in new ways, they were doing far more than merely "jazzing up" the stories for a contemporary audience. They were thinking about the meaning of these ancient events for people who lived in a different time and place. Thus, in the Biblical narrative tradition, we are listening to storytellers who were some of the most influential thinkers in human history. Their interpretations of the actions of God in the experience of Israel and in Jesus Christ have had an impact at least comparable to that of the greatest philosophers. Our task is to understand their way of thinking.

The most important character in their stories was always God. The Biblical stories are, first of all, stories about the actions and the responses of God. Thus, in ancient Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was experienced as a person and was described in the stories as a character. Furthermore, God is a character who has feelings, which are explicitly described: anger and wrath, compassion and loving kindness. These feelings are named as God's response to particular events. For example, God's anger burns hot against Israel because of the golden calf: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.'" (Exodus 32:9-10) Throughout the narratives of the Old Testament, God is experienced as a person in the sense that God is presented as a character alongside the other characters of the story.

In the Gospel narratives, God is even more fully developed as a character. On the one hand, God rarely appears directly as a character in the story and God's appearances are generally limited to brief speeches from heaven (e.g., Mark 1:11; 9:7). But, in the stories of Jesus as the Son of God, the Evangelists make the direct experience of God as a person even more graphic. Thus, the stories about Jesus of Nazareth are, by implication, stories about God. As a result, God is known in the Gospels both as a character who speaks at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration and as the one who is uniquely present in Jesus himself. Throughout the period of the oral tradition, therefore, God was experienced in Biblical narratives as a unique and distinctive character.

## Biblical Narration in Manuscript Culture

The first record of the writing of a text in the history of Israel is, appropriately, the Lord God's inscribing the stone tablets on Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments (Ex. 31:18). The order in which God uses the media is also appropriate. The Lord God first recites the laws orally (Exodus 20:1-31:17) and then gives Moses the written tablets. The earliest records of writing in the ancient Near East have been pushed back to the 4th millennium BC with the recent discovery of the royal library at Ebla.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, we now have texts dating from the period prior to 3500 B.C. Writing in this period was, however, a highly specialized skill, possessed by very few persons, and in no sense a medium of mass communication. Thus, writing was used to record business transactions, laws, military victories, and songs.

The wider use of writing as a means of communication was made possible by the development and distribution of papyrus. The first record of the use of writing in the narration of Biblical stories in the history of Israel is the reading of the Deuteronomy scroll in the eighteenth year of the reign of King Josiah (II Kings 22:3), which is generally dated 621 B.C. The book was discovered in the Temple by Hilkiyah, the high priest, and given to Shaphan, Josiah's secretary. After hearing it read aloud, Josiah ordered it to be read aloud to the people:

Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great; and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which had been found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book; and all the people joined in the covenant. (II Kings 23:1-3)

This was the beginning of the Josianic reform, in which all worship of Yahweh was centralized in Jerusalem and all worship of other gods forbidden throughout the land of Israel.

The next public reading shortly thereafter (605 B.C.) reveals in still another way the enormous power that was given to written documents in the ancient world. Jeremiah dictated and Baruch wrote a scroll, which recorded, as the Lord God had instructed Jeremiah, "all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today." (Jeremiah 36:2) Baruch then read the scroll to all the people in the house of the Lord on a fast day. When the king Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, heard of the scroll from his attendants, he ordered Jehudi to get it:

...and Jehudi read it to the king and all the princes who stood beside the king. It was the ninth month, and the king was sitting in the winter house and there was a fire burning in the brazier before him. As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier. (Jeremiah 36:21-23)

This violent act of resistance against both the words of Jeremiah and the new medium is a symbolic action of the highest significance. As has so often been the

case in the history of transitions in the medium of Biblical narration, this was a time of cataclysmic political change for Israel.

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, the religion of Israel was reorganized in ways that made the writing and public reading of sacred manuscripts central. Thus, the first major action after the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah was the gathering for renewal of the covenant with the Lord God:

When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were now settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in the square in front of the Water Gate, and Ezra the scribe was asked to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had enjoined upon Israel. On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, every man and woman, and all who were capable of understanding what they heard.  
(Nehemiah 8:1-2)

And Ezra read from early morning to midday. Several aspects of this occasion are worthy of note. Ezra was one who had mastered writing and reading aloud. He was both a scribe and a priest. The public reading of the stories of Moses took place at the central national event of covenant renewal, an occasion which was the exact equivalent of the covenant at Sinai and of Joshua's reciting the tradition at the formation of the tribal amphyctyony. Thus, the leader was one who has mastered the medium of the new age, writing, just as Moses and Joshua had mastered the storytelling art of their age.

In this period, therefore, we find the earliest written materials that were used as a primary means of mass communication in Israel. With the acceptance of the recording and distribution of the sacred stories in writing, a new era was inaugurated in the life of Israel. This marks the beginning of rabbinic Judaism with its focus on the scribe and the rabbi. The scribe was the master of the written law and the rabbi was the master and creator of the oral law. This relationship of written and oral Torah was the heart of the new media mix of this period. During this period, the synagogue was established as the characteristic institution of Judaism. The synagogue was organized for the public reading of the Scriptures. As long as the Temple remained, the synagogue was of lesser importance. But, with the destruction of the second Temple in 70 A.D., the synagogue became the central organizational structure for Judaism.

And the churches of early Christianity had precisely the same structure. Thus, just as the Christian observance of Jesus' death and resurrection, the Eucharist, incorporated many elements of the Temple sacrifices, so also the basic structure of the liturgy was derived from the reading and interpretation of the Scriptures in the synagogue. Prior to the development of writing and public reading of the manuscripts of the Scriptures, there were no congregations that met for weekly worship. That characteristic pattern of worship (which continues to this day) was established during this period. With the development of the culture of writing, a new characteristic occasion for Biblical narration was established, public reading of a written manuscript.

It is important at this point to establish that manuscripts in the ancient world were generally read aloud. Even when reading alone, one did not read silently. Thus, in Acts 8:28-30, the Ethiopian eunuch was reading alone in his chariot when Philip

heard him reading. This custom is also reflected in Augustine's comment (Confessions VI.3; 4th century A.D.) describing his surprise at Ambrose's curious practice of reading in silence: "... while reading, his eyes glanced over the pages, and his heart searched out the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent." In the rest of the paragraph, Augustine seeks to explain this strange behavior on the part of his revered mentor and suggests that concentration or preservation of his voice might have been motives; he then concludes: "But whatever was his motive in so doing, doubtless in such a man was a good one." In Judaism, according to Billerbeck, reading in silence was forbidden.<sup>10</sup> For example, R. Samuel's admonition to R. Judah was: "O keen scholar, open your mouth and read (the written tradition), open your mouth and repeat (the oral tradition) so that (your knowledge) may be maintained in you and that which have learned may live." (B. Erubin 54a) Thus, the function of a manuscript in the ancient world was to record sounds, which the writer assumed that his reader would reproduce in the process of reading, even when reading alone.<sup>11</sup>

The character of reading in the ancient world is further indicated by the way in which books were published. c. H. Roberts states, for example, "Publication, in literary circles in Rome or Alexandria and equally in Christian circles, was always by public recitation..."<sup>12</sup> A number of ancient books contain clear indications that they were intended for aural experience. Thus, A. D. Nock refers to a papyrus (2nd century A.D.) in which the acclamation following the recounting of a miracle is introduced by the phrase, "Do you say ...", an imperative plural addressed to the hearers, which clearly presupposes, as Nock says, "a public which hears such holy stories recited."<sup>13</sup> The Shepherd of Hermas is specially marked for reading aloud.<sup>14</sup> And finally, the opening of the Revelation to John clearly indicates the desired mode of transmission: "Blessed is he who reads aloud the word of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear..." (Rev. 1:3) In light of this evidence, it is probable that the instruction to "the reader" in Mark 13:14 is an instruction to a public reader. Thus, reading in the ancient world was generally a public as well as an oral event.

Most of the audiences for the recital of Biblical narratives never saw the manuscripts, but only heard them recited, either from memory or from a manuscript. The function of manuscripts was, therefore, to record and transmit the sounds of the story so that they could be reproduced at a later reading. In this sense, the function of an ancient manuscript was the same as a musical score today. It was a means of recording sounds for later recitations. Thus, in the manuscript period, the characteristic occasion for Biblical narration was the public reading of a Biblical manuscript.

The style of Biblical narration changed as manuscript reading rather than storytelling became the dominant occasion. The reading was, first of all, less spontaneous because the words were fixed. Particularly when the stories were read in public worship, the context was more formal and more highly ritualized. The occasion also created greater distance. The narrator was physically separated from the audience by a lectern on which the manuscript was laid for reading. The lectern was generally in the front of the room. The narrator's eyes were necessarily focused on the manuscript, rather than on the listeners. The occasions for public readings were also more highly organized. Eventually, people even began to sit in rows that were directly parallel to the

arrangement of the marks in the manuscript. Gestures became more restrained or even disappeared completely.

The emotional expressiveness of the chant was continued. In actual fact, we can only infer that the stories were originally chanted from the traditions of chanting which were recorded during the manuscript period. The Hebrew Scriptures have continued to be chanted in public recitations. The cantors of Judaism have recited the Scriptures with a free-flowing chant since the earliest records were written. The Masoretic text contains trope marks, which indicate the melody by which the text is to be sung. In order to read the text, therefore, one must read not only the words but also the trope marks, which indicate the chant.

The same was true in early Christianity. The rich tradition of Byzantine chant is a continuation and development of the chant traditions of the early Church. Gregorian chant is only a later stream of the same tradition, which in turn provided the basic sources of Western music.<sup>15</sup> The preservation of the chant meant that the recitation of the stories in worship continued to be emotionally expressive.

Furthermore, the chant made possible audience participation. In the liturgy of all the traditions that have developed out of the religion of Israel - Rabbinic Judaism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism - sung phrases have preceded and followed the reading of the Biblical narratives in public worship. In some particular liturgies, such as the Roman Catholic liturgy for Good Friday, there are audience responses built into the story itself. In the medium of manuscript, therefore, the Biblical narratives generally continued to be recited with melody in a highly expressive manner.

Reading in the ancient world required a much higher degree of memorization than reading today. In fact, it was necessary to have virtually memorized a manuscript in order to read it well. Several factors contributed to this necessity. First of all, the manuscripts had no punctuation and no spacing. The following is a short segment of a Hebrew and a Greek manuscript. [Insert texts] In the Hebrew manuscript, there is no marking of the vowels and the text is only consonantal. Thus, in order to read the text, it is necessary to have memorized the vowels and the trope marks which indicate the melody. In Greek, while the vowels are present, the divisions of words, sentences, and the melodies must also be supplied from memory. As can be seen, reading such a manuscript required extensive preparation and a high degree of memorization.

Memorization as word-for-word mastery of a tradition first appears during this period in the media history of Biblical narration. The function of memorization in a writing culture is radically different than in oral culture. As the traditions of the Biblical narratives came to be associated with the written text, the responsibility of memorization came to be the reproduction of the authoritative tradition. Furthermore, as we have seen, reading the text required a high degree of memorization. Thus, a primary task of education in the ancient world was to enable students first to copy and then to memorize the manuscripts of the classic works of rhetoric, philosophy, and tradition. In this period, therefore, the function of memory is much more closely tied to the reproduction of the details of a manuscript.

Furthermore, while externalized to some degree, the tradition continued to be internalized because the processes of memory were still involved. The Biblical narrative tradition continued to be memorized to some degree throughout the Middle

Ages. In the monasteries, extensive recital of the manuscripts made possible the memorization and internalization of the Scriptures. The windows of medieval cathedrals were pictures of the stories and were a pictorial form of memory reinforcement which enabled the common people to remember the stories that were recited during the liturgical year.

The characteristic patterns of community organization in the manuscript era were radically different than those of the earlier era. In contrast to the family/tribe and national celebrations at the Temple, the congregation became the primary organizational unit. The synagogue and, later, the church were relatively small groups which gathered around the public reading of the Scriptures for weekly and, sometimes, daily worship. This common structure of social organization has continued to this day. The gathering of a congregation around the Holy Book for public readings of the Scriptures continues to be the fundamental rite of Jewish and Christian worship. The recital of prayers is the other common element which characterizes all Jewish and Christian worship. Emphasis is placed variously on a sermon or a Eucharist in various traditions. Thus, Roman Catholic masses have often had no sermon, and Protestant services often have no Eucharist. But the reading of the Scriptures has been an unvarying center for the worship services of the communities which trace their origins to the worship of the God of ancient Israel.

The radicality of the change in the sensorium of Biblical narration with the development of writing can be seen most clearly in the changes in methods of interpretation. In the oral period, the stories were interpreted and made meaningful in relation to later situations by retelling the stories. Even the tradition of the Gospel of John, which was so heavily influenced by the new world that was emerging, still pursued the interpretation of the Gospel tradition by retelling the story. But, in this period, a new mode of interpretation emerged and became dominant: the interpretation of Biblical narratives by the identification and exposition of ideas. The clearest exposition of this development in Hellenistic civilization and its connection with the transition from oral to written media is Eric Havelock's Preface to Plato.<sup>15</sup> Havelock proposes an answer to a question which has puzzled interpreters of Plato: why was Plato so hostile towards the poets that he banished them from the Republic? Havelock's answer is that poets were the primary representatives of the oral culture whose center was the recital of the Homeric epics. Plato recognized that, as long as people continued the ancient process of retelling the Homeric epics as the center of the cultural life, they would never learn to think in the ways that were essential to the new world of writing. Thus, in order to break the power of the oral culture and its ways of thinking, Plato banished the poets. In place of the recital of Homeric tales, Plato put philosophy and the process of critical reflection. Plato wanted people to learn to detach themselves from sensory experience and think about ideas, rather than getting involved in Homeric storytelling. For Plato, the very nature of reality is not sense experience, but the priori ideas present in the mind which sense experience enables us to remember. Meaning and truth were to be found, not through the telling of the Homeric epics, but through reflection on ideas. As writing gradually became the dominant medium of mass communication in first the Alexandrian empire and later in the Roman empire, this same pattern of thinking was steadily established as normative.

The interaction between this new world and the Biblical narrative tradition produced a new system of interpretation. Rather than stories being retold from the perspective of a later period, the characteristic way of interpreting stories was to identify the timeless ideas that were illustrated in the stories. Allegory became the dominant mode of narrative interpretation. The stories were understood as having a literal or surface meaning, but the truth of the stories was to be found in the hidden truths of revelation that lay beneath the surface.

Allegorical interpretation took various forms. Origen, the greatest allegorical interpreter of early Christianity, pursued a three-fold interpretive pattern - the literal, the moral and the spiritual - corresponding to the body, soul and spirit of man. In medieval exegesis, there were four levels or senses of the story: the literal sense, the allegorical sense in relation to Christ and the Church, the tropological or moral sense, and the anagogical sense in relation to heavenly realities. But the common element in all was that the basic truths of the text were to be found outside, above, or beneath the surface meaning. G. W. H. Lampe has concisely summarized Augustine's highly complex allegorical interpretation of John's account of the feeding of the five thousand: <sup>16</sup>

The real meaning is contained in every detail of the story. Christ on the mountain means that the Word is on high. His question to Philip is meant to teach by eliciting an admission of ignorance.

The loaves which Jesus took are not the five, but loaves which he created. The five loaves are the Pentateuch; they are of barley, not wheat, because the grain of barley is hard to extract through its covering of chaff; and the meaning of the Old Testament is veiled in outward symbols. The boy is Israel, which carried the nourishment provided by the Old Testament but did not feed on it. The two fishes are the two anointed ones in the Old Testament, the priest and the king. Christ, who bears both these offices, is revealed in the barley grain, but hidden by the chaff. The Pentateuch, when broken by exposition, makes many books. But Israel was ignorant, the barley chaff still veiling their understanding. The five thousand are Israel under the Law... They recline on the grass because their thoughts are carnal, and all flesh is grass. The fragments are the more secret teachings which the crowd could not receive. They were entrusted to those who were capable of teachings others also, namely the apostles. Hence there were twelve baskets. At the time, men could only see the miracle and marvel; we can read its meaning and believe.

Thus, allegorical interpretation became the means by which a connection was made between the meaning of the story in a later period and the original narrative. In one sense, it is a retelling of the story. But the governing principle of the retelling is no longer the representation of the original event. Instead, the retelling is organized around the identification and explication of the ideas or truths which are implicit in the details of the story.

In addition to providing the basic mode of interpretation of Biblical narratives, allegory also became the dominant form of storytelling in Christianity. Dante's Inferno, Milton's Paradise Lost, and John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress are characteristic of Christian literary classics. To this day, virtually all Christian imaginative literature is characterized by a high degree of allegory. The beginnings

of allegorical interpretation occur within the Scriptures themselves (e.g., Mark 4:14-20; Galatians 4:22-31). But this relatively infrequent mode of interpretation in the first century became the dominant mode of interpretation for the next 1400 years. This change in the mode of interpretation corresponded with the change in the basic communication situation. No longer was a storyteller the primary interpreter of Biblical narratives. Instead, the preacher, seeking to make meaningful a public reading of a Biblical narrative manuscript from a cathedral pulpit, became the primary interpreter of the Biblical narrative tradition.

In this context, the characteristic way of speaking about God also changed. God was no longer described as a character in a narrative, but was discussed as a being. God now became the subject of doctrinal discussions in which categories such as omnipotence, transcendence, and omniscience were utilized. Thus, one might compare the way in which different interpretations of the identity of Christ were formulated in the period of storytelling interpretation and the period of doctrinal interpretation. Mark presented Jesus as one who was adopted by God as Messiah at his baptism while John made it clear in the prologue to his story that the logos was eternally one with God. Athanasias and Arius debated the same issue as to whether the Son was a similar substance (homoiousias - Arius) with the Father or was the same substance (homoousias - Athanasius). The Nicene Creed reflects Athanasius' victory as well as the way of talking about God that was characteristic of this period. The same issues were discussed and lived out, but in radically different ways. In this period, therefore, theology was established as the dominant form of Christian language about God. In the media world of writing, the theologian (along with the preacher) took the place of the storyteller as the primary interpreter of the God whose actions were described in Biblical narratives.

#### Biblical Narration in the Medium of Print

Gutenberg's printing of the Latin Bible probably began in 1449 or 1450 and was completed in 1455.<sup>17</sup> While it was probably not the first printed book, it was undoubtedly one of the first. Within a century, the Bible had been translated into German, English and other vernacular languages and was distributed widely in print. For the first time in history, therefore, it was possible for a large number of individuals to have access to a Biblical text.

While the public reading of the Biblical narratives continued, the new characteristic occasion of Biblical narration in this period was private reading. It was now possible for laypersons to read the Biblical narratives to themselves and to their families. Reading aloud continued to be the general practice. As a result, the sensorium of Biblical narration continued to have a large component of sound. That is, Biblical narratives were still heard. But the new factor was that the stories could be heard privately and in small groups as well as in large public readings by the priests.

The style of the recital of Biblical narratives gradually became more informal during this period, as the styles of reading which characterized private reading became more normative. However, the chanting of the Scriptures continued in the liturgies of the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran traditions. In the Calvinist tradition, the chanting of the Psalms became a regular feature of congregational worship. This style of recitation continued throughout most of this

period and is still continued today in some parts of these communions. But the chanting of the Scriptures has become an anachronism in most parts of the Church, as the more accessible styles of private recitation have become more natural and easily understood.

The gradual decline in the chanting of the Scriptures has also accompanied an increasingly rigid and unexpressive style of reading. In contrast to the tradition of liturgical actions - the procession of the Gospel, the reading of the Gospel lesson in the midst of the congregation, the congregational response before and after the lesson, the possibility of symbolic and highly stylized gestures during the reading, and the richness of the chant, all of which are continued in some parts of the Greek Orthodox liturgy - the styles of Biblical narration in worship have become increasingly restrictive. The reader does not move at all while standing behind a lectern. Vocal expressiveness is forced to operate within a narrow compass as the notes that can be sounded by the narrator's voice gradually become fewer. Emotional expression in the public reading of the Scriptures tends to become obtrusive and out of place. As a result, in this period the reading of the Scriptures, particularly in Protestantism, became a prelude to the sermon rather than a central action of worship in and of itself. Thus, the characteristics of the medium of print uniform, well ordered, a minimum of texture and individual distinctiveness have gradually been duplicated in the styles of oral recitation of the Scriptures.

With the development of printed manuscripts of the Biblical narratives, memory was less important for reading. First of all, with the ready availability of a printed text, it was no longer necessary to memorize a story in order to be able to recite it. Even so, the tradition of memorization of the Biblical texts continued to be practiced. In part, this was because of the frequency with which people heard the traditions read aloud. Readings in the family circle, in services of public worship, and private reading were all practiced widely. I personally have observed many pastors, especially black and Hispanic pastors, who have read the Scriptures aloud to themselves and in their families and congregations and who have an often phenomenally accurate and extensive knowledge of the King James Bible. Furthermore, memorization of the Bible was generally encouraged in Christian education within Protestantism until this century.

With the development of print and the mass distribution of the Scriptures, the organizational structures of the Church were transformed. The location of authority in the Scriptures, which were available to each individual Christian, created a massive fracturing of the community organization patterns of the Western Church in general and of Protestantism in particular. The transfer of authority from the Pope to the Scriptures resulted in the establishment of centers of organizational authority wherever like-minded persons could agree on a common interpretation of the Scriptures. The split between the Roman Catholic and Protestant communities was only the first of a series of divisions which soon happened to the three major wings of the Protestant movement: the Lutherans, the Calvinists, and the Anabaptists. The correlation between the new medium of Biblical narration and this development cannot be proven. Nevertheless, communities have tended to form around the normative experience of the primary religious traditions. In the media world of print, that experience was highly individualized. And the patterns of community

organization that developed during this period correspond with the character of that experience.

There was a radical change in the mode of interpretation of Biblical narratives during this period as well. The Reformers, led by Luther and Calvin, rejected allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. Over against the tendency of previous Biblical interpretation to be governed by the traditions of the Church, Luther maintained that the Bible interpreted itself and that the literal sense of the words was their true meaning. Luther's characteristic statement of this principle was that scripture is "through itself most certain, most easily accessible, comprehensible, interpreting itself, proving, judging all the words of all men."<sup>18</sup> Over against the highly complex theories of the four-fold interpretation of the Biblical texts, Luther developed a focus on the grammatical or historical sense of the text. This simplification of the process of interpretation had a freeing effect on the possibility of individual Christians being able to read and understand the Scriptures themselves. For Luther and Calvin, literal interpretation referred to the plain sense and is closely related to the letters of the text itself. In a sense, therefore, literal interpretation is interpretation that makes the meaning of the letters on the page authoritative. This appeal was only possible in an age when the interpretation could be confirmed by looking at the letters of the text itself.

Literal interpretation was combined with figural interpretation. In contrast to allegory, in which a detailed relationship between the elements of the story and the truths of another realm are identified, figural or typological interpretation makes connections between the patterns or images of the text and the later situation. Erich Auerbach has provided the clearest definition in his classic work, *Mimesis*.<sup>19</sup>

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, or their interdependence is a spiritual act.

Thus, the Old Testament in general was interpreted as a series of figures that anticipated and were fulfilled by the events described in the New Testament. For example, Abraham's binding and near sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22) is a figure of God's sacrifice of his only son. A major distinguishing feature of figural interpretation, in contrast to allegory, is that both the original event and the event with which it is connected are historical events in time. Allegory involves the recognition of a timeless or eternal truth in a historical event. The two elements of literal and figural interpretation are interwoven and mutually support and reinforce each other.<sup>20</sup> The stories were thus seen as having a realistic meaning which was, on the one hand, a plain description of what actually took place but also was figurally related to events before and after.

For the purposes of this brief survey, the essential recognition is that the interpretation of Biblical narratives in the period of print constituted a major change from previous patterns. To be sure, Augustine and other interpreters had pursued a combination of literal and figural interpretation. But this was combined in the fathers with an allegorical and

anagogical reading that was rejected by the Reformers. There were, therefore, lines of continuity as well as discontinuity. Nevertheless, the new element in this period was a steady and concentrated attention on the literal meaning of the Biblical text itself. Thus, the development of this combination of literal and figurative interpretation took place in the period of the extension of Biblical narration in private reading of printed Biblical texts.

If a characteristic feature of the experience of God in the Biblical narration of this period were to be suggested, it would be the experience of receiving God's grace as individuals. In this sense, there was a distinct personalization of the experience of God. Luther's realization of God's unconditional grace, apart from works of religious obligation, is typical. No longer was God a distant judge but, instead, God's Word was a near and present reality through which God's grace became equally near and present. The degree to which this was connected with the characteristic Protestant experience of reading the stories of the actions of God in solitude or with one's family cannot be determined. But it is certain that this new realization of God's grace happened during the same period as the distribution of the Scriptures in print.

#### Biblical Narration in Silent Print

The introduction of the printed text as a means for the distribution of writing happened at a relatively specific and identifiable point in history. But the evolution of silent reading, like the development of writing, is much more difficult to specify. And yet, from the point of view of the medium of Biblical narration, it was probably the most significant change of all.

Medieval scholars have drawn together a broad range of evidence which indicates that writing continued to be read aloud, as it was in the ancient world, through the Middle Ages.<sup>21</sup> In an essay on historians of the Middle Ages, Beryl Smalley states:<sup>22</sup>

Ancient and medieval writers expected their books to be read aloud. Publication might take the form of reading to a circle of friends or to a larger audience, an ancient practice which was revived in the twelfth century and perhaps earlier. From the very beginning of its composition, the writer had in mind what his book would sound like. First, he generally dictated it: pen-driving was a chore to be avoided if help was available. Then he would have it read back to him or read it himself and make corrections. When circulated it would be read aloud. Medieval writers address their audience as 'readers' or 'hearers' interchangeably, and their punctuation often supposes that the text will be read aloud: the text of Orderic Vital's Ecclesiastical History, for instance, has symbols to indicate a change of pitch in the reader's voice. Even a person reading 'to himself' pronounced the words aloud and gesticulated as he read.

And, as we know, oral reading has ceased to be the common means of reading written material in the 20th century.

But the transition from what Father Ong has called the 'talked book' of the Middle Ages to the print of the modern world, which is almost totally disassociated from sound, is difficult to date. William Nelson has suggested that one way of dating this transition is to observe the changes in the pattern of address; hence, the title of

his recent article is, "From 'Listen, Lordings' to 'Dear Reader.'" After investigating the evidence, he comes to the following conclusion:<sup>23</sup>

The custom of reading viva ~ did not die but faded into its modern insignificance. The later seventeenth century seems to have been a turning-point. Elocutionary punctuation indicative of pauses and pitch was then largely supplanted by syntactic. Prose style tended towards logical rather than rhetorical persuasion.

In the 16th century, Edmund Spenser assumed that his readers would read his poetry aloud. The King James Version of the English Bible, which was completed in the early 17th century, was clearly written to be read aloud. As late as the 19th century, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain held extensive public readings of their works.

The transition in America was probably even later than in Europe. Thus, John O'Brien, a professor of education at the University of Chicago, published a book entitled *Silent Reading* in 1921 in which he argued that the current practice of teaching reading as an oral exercise should be ended in favor of teaching silent reading.<sup>24</sup> This would indicate that reading aloud was still a relatively common practice in this country well into this century. In this case, while it cannot be firmly dated, the silencing of the written word was a process that was only completed centuries after the introduction of print.

We who live in the 20th century are intimately familiar with the characteristic occasion for Biblical narration in the medium of print read in silence. The text is opened before our eyes, generally on a desk. The black marks on the page are examined. Reference works or dictionaries may be used to explore the meaning of particular words. A wide range of books may be consulted and detailed analysis of the text itself is often done. But, as a general rule, the text remains silent and is not experienced as sound.

When evaluated from the perspective of media analysis, the silencing of Biblical narrative is by far the most revolutionary and radical change in the entire Biblical narrative tradition. Prior to this, manuscripts and printed texts were means by which the sounds of the stories could be transmitted. The texts served precisely the same function in relation to the sounds of the stories as musical scores today. And while the development of writing did have a major impact on the perception and interpretation of the narratives, essential continuity with the basic medium of Biblical narrative was maintained. That is, Biblical narratives continued to be sounds that were spoken and heard. The Biblical stories were read aloud and experienced as stories, just as we continue to read children's stories aloud. In this sense, the original medium of Biblical storytelling was continued. But, in this period, for the first time in history, Biblical narratives became documents, marks on a page to be studied as reference sources rather than as the recording of sounds in written signs. In relation to the original and intended medium of Biblical narrative, it is a transition as radical as if we were only to study the tradition of music and drama as documents and stop performing the plays and listening to the music.

Memorization has become a largely foreign and meaningless exercise. After all, why memorize something you can look up tomorrow? In fact, a high degree of hostility towards memorization has developed among those who have thoroughly internalized the medium of silent print. Thus, persons who are highly literate and who

have learned to read in silence often react with hostility and massive resistance to the suggestion of memorizing Biblical narratives. The reaction goes far beyond indifference and includes the fear of failure and the anxiety of an unknown experience associated with an alien piety.

In spite of the fact that silent reading has become a normative mode of experiencing Biblical narratives, public readings of Biblical narratives, primarily in public worship, have continued. The style of recitation in this period has tended to be formed by the dominant medium. Recitations of Biblical narratives become increasingly objective and melodically restricted. Emotional expression in any form is seen as alien to an objective rendering of the text and is discouraged as a source of distortion. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has stated this position in a characteristically clear and forceful manner:<sup>25</sup>

How shall we read the Scriptures?... it will soon become apparent that it is not easy to read the Bible aloud for others. The more artless, the more objective, the more humble one's attitude toward the material is, the better will the reading accord with the subject... It may be taken as a rule for the right reading of the Scriptures that the reader should never identify himself with the person who is speaking in the Bible. It is not I that am angered, but God; it is not I giving consolation, but God; it is not I admonishing, but God admonishing in the Scriptures. I shall be able, of course, to express the fact that it is God who is angered, who is consoling and admonishing, not by indifferent monotony, but only with inmost concern and rapport, as one who knows that himself is being addressed. It will make all the difference between right and wrong reading of Scriptures if I do not identify myself with God but quite simply serve Him. Otherwise I will become rhetorical, emotional, sentimental, or coercive and imperative; that is, I will be directing the listeners' attention to myself instead of to the Word. But this is to commit the worst of sins in presenting the Scriptures.

Thus, Bonhoeffer equates virtually any form of emotional expression with an inappropriate identification with the characters of the story. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer's directions are an accurate statement of the ideal public recitation of Biblical narratives in this period.

The styles of congregational response to readings of Biblical narratives have also tended to become more distanced. Congregations listen to the readings with little or no involvement in the story itself. Indeed, the custom of congregations looking at pew bibles or printed inserts during the reading of the Scriptures has become increasingly prevalent. This is perhaps the ultimate extension of the identification of Biblical narratives with the marks on the page, while preserving the semblance of the ancient tradition. The story is now assumed to be in the text, even while it is being read aloud. Thus, everyone now has equal access to the text, but the public reading is virtually meaningless. It will be a logical extension of this tendency in the medium of Biblical narrative for there to be a period of silence during the worship service in which everyone can read the text for themselves. And, in some congregations, the Scripture lesson has become a brief reading of as little as two or three verses that serve as the basis for the sermon, which effectively eliminates the reading of the Scriptures from public worship.

Thus, as the Biblical narrative tradition has increasingly become disassociated from sound, the public recitations have tended to take on the character of the documents. As a result, the recital of Biblical narrative has become a series of relatively uniform and detached sounds.

The change in the medium of Biblical narrative has corresponded with an equally radical transformation of the dominant mode of interpretation. Hans Frei's truly monumental work, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, has made it possible for us to define the change in the interpretation of Biblical narrative that accompanied the development of historical criticism. The importance of this book is that it clarifies the source of many of today's problems in the interpretation of Biblical narratives. Frei's book, however, is an extraordinarily complex and densely written analysis of hermeneutical treatises from Germany and England in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Its concepts and terminology are truly foreign to many readers, including many scholars. But his basic argument is of such importance for understanding the interpretation of Biblical narratives today that I want to summarize it briefly and then describe its importance.

The rise of historical criticism took place in the late 17th and 18th centuries, during the same period that silent reading became a common practice in Europe. Frei argues that, prior to this period, precritical methods combining literal and figural interpretation made possible a "realistic" mode of reading the Biblical narratives. This mode of interpretation identified the realistic or "history-like" character of the narratives with their literal meaning. And when there were either obviously mythological elements of the stories or conflicts between different accounts of the same event, those were interpreted in relation to the figures or patterns of revelation. As a result, the meaning of the narratives continued to be closely related to their meaning as narratives.

During this period, the development of critical historical methods made it necessary to distinguish the literal sense of the story from its value or meaning as a historical reference. For example, the literal meaning of Mark's story may be that Jesus was tried before the entire Sanhedrin on Passover night (Mark 14:53-65). But a comparison of this account with John's story of a hearing before Annas, and other historical information about Jewish legal practices of the period, has led many scholars to conclude that Mark's story has little value or meaning as a historical description of what actually happened. As a result, a sharp distinction has been made between the literal meaning of the story and its meaning as a historical reference.

This distinction led to a new definition of meaning which became normative in this period. The meaning of the narratives came to be equated with what Frei calls "meaning as reference."<sup>26</sup> Rather than their meaning being found in their plain or grammatical sense as "history-like" narratives, their meaning now was found in their value or meaningfulness as sources for the identification of a separable subject matter. That is, the meaning was no longer found in the Biblical narratives themselves as narratives but in a separate subject matter or idea which is seen as the real reference of the text. There were two possible subject matters for the meaning of the Biblical narratives as reference sources. Frei calls them ostensive and ideal reference.

One possible subject matter of Biblical narratives was space-time events (meaning as ostensive reference)<sup>27</sup>. The investigation of this subject matter of Biblical narrative sought to define the meaning of Biblical narratives in relation to the history of what actually happened. The results of these investigations were various reconstructions of Biblical history, including the quest of the historical Jesus. In general, liberals found the Gospels, for example, to be full of myth, legend, and theological interpretation which rendered the Gospels of minimal value as historical sources. They characteristically called attention to the radical discrepancies in different stories of the same event and interpreted the miracles as signs of the influence of legend and myth. Conservatives found the Gospels to be a more or less factual account of what actually happened, spent a great deal of energy explaining the apparent discrepancies in various accounts, and interpreted the miracles as instances of supernatural intervention.<sup>28</sup>

The other possible subject matter of Biblical narratives was the teachings or ideas to which the stories refer (meaning as ideal reference).<sup>29</sup> Regardless of the degree to which the narratives had meaning as ostensive reference, they were meaningful as sources for the identification and interpretation of early Christian thought and beliefs. The study of the meaning of Biblical narratives as ideal reference has resulted in the exposition of the theology of the Old and New Testaments. In this context, liberals have tended to emphasize the diversity and conflicts that were present in the various theologies of the Biblical communities and authors, while conservatives have tended to search for a unified and consistent system of ideas.

Frei argues that meaning as reference has eliminated the meaning of the Biblical narratives as narratives. His description of this period of Biblical narrative interpretation is appropriately described as an eclipse. The basic problem is that the meaning of the stories has been presupposed to be a subject matter apart from the narratives themselves. The story form, then, is little more than a vehicle for that content. If, however, the meaning is inextricably related to the shape of the narratives as narratives, looking for the meaning somewhere apart from the narrative will result in a reduction or loss of meaning. The eclipse of Biblical narrative is, therefore, the loss of narrative meaning. In effect, the tendency of meaning as reference has been to render the narratives meaningless.<sup>30</sup>

It is not going too far to say that the story is the meaning, or alternatively, what the meaning emerges from the story form, rather than being merely illustrated by it, as would be the case in allegory and in a different way, in myth. A great theme in literature of the novelistic type, like a pattern in a historical sequence, cannot be paraphrased by a general statement. To do so would approach reducing it to meaninglessness. In each case the theme has meaning only to the extent that it is instantiated and hence, narrated; and this meaning through instantiation is not illustrated (as though it were an intellectually presubsting or preconceived archetype or ideal essence) but constituted through the mutual, specific determination of agents, speech, social context, and circumstances that form the indispensable narrative web...one would want to say that the location of meaning in narrative of the realistic sort is the text, the narrative structure or sequence itself...Especially in narrative, novelistic, or history-like form, where meaning is most nearly

inseparable from the words - from the descriptive shape of the story as a pattern of enactment, there is neither need for nor use in looking for meaning in a more profound stratum underneath the structure (a separable "subject matter") or in a separable author's "intention," or in a combination of such behind-the-scenes projections.

The source of the eclipse of Biblical narrative is, therefore, the common presupposition, shared alike by conservatives and liberals, that the meaning of the stories is to be found in reference to some other system of meaning outside the narratives themselves.

This does not mean that there is no appreciation of narrative in modern historical criticism of Biblical narratives. Indeed, there is a profound sense in which the reconstructions of Biblical history and Biblical theology are a form of storytelling. Once the historical or theological data have been identified and extracted from the Biblical narratives themselves, new stories can be told. And many of the great works of Biblical history and theology do have a story-like character. For example, the histories of Israel by Hartin Noth and John Bright both have a narrative shape which is indispensable to their meaning. A narrative of events shrouded in varying degrees of mystery emerges from their accounts. So also, the theologies of the Old and New Testament by Gerhard von Rad and Rudolph Bultmann also have a narrative shape in at least part of each work. In these studies, a narrative of the history and development of ideas is recounted.

And yet, while there are elements of some continuity with Biblical narrative tradition, there is also a profound discontinuity. For the first time in the history of the tradition, Biblical narratives have been effectively silenced. No longer have the stories been experienced as stories. Thus, the loss of narrative meaning and the ascendancy of meaning as reference is correlated with the change in the medium of Biblical narrative from sound to silence. Meaning as reference directly corresponds with the treatment of Biblical narratives as documentary sources to be used in the construction of either historical or theological accounts.

Thus, Biblical narration in the media world of silent print has changed. The disassociation of Biblical narrative from the original medium of Biblical storytelling has become much more extreme. Frei's work makes it possible for us to understand both the radicality of that change and the sources of many of our problems now.

#### Biblical Narration in Electronic Media

A basic pattern emerges from this story. The chart on the facing page capsulizes the basic motifs. When the dominant medium of communication in the culture changes, a new challenge is faced by the community of faith. The challenge is to make the Biblical narrative tradition available in the new medium. The adjustment to a new medium creates a new constellation of meanings and effects. And in each new period, a new combination of styles of Biblical narration emerges. The characteristic patterns of recitation and interpretation from previous ages continue, but now in combination with the styles of the new age.

The challenge before us who live at the beginning of a new media age in the history of Biblical narration is to find the ways of making Biblical narratives available in the media of our age while maintaining continuity with the tradition. An approach to this challenge is also implicit in this story.

Biblical narration now is a combination of all the patterns that have been developed in the past. But the pattern of Biblical narration in silent print is the most pervasive. The element of greatest discontinuity in this period with the tradition has been the silencing of Biblical narratives. This history suggests, therefore, that a recovery of the original medium of Biblical narrative is an important step in the development of an appropriate and faithful interpretation of Biblical narratives in the age of electronic media.

The way forward, therefore, is to explore a new combination of styles of Biblical narration. We will not eliminate anything from the past but, hopefully, we will be able to find a new mix that will make the stories of God's decisive actions in human history available and meaningful. This will necessarily involve essential continuity with the traditions of Biblical criticism. But Frei's identification of the loss of narrative meaning implicit in the eclipse of Biblical narrative also means that we must recognize and attempt to solve this problem. The challenge before us, therefore, is to rediscover the meaning of the Biblical narratives as narratives. One way of approaching this new age is to begin to tell the stories.

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