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## The Evolution of a New Paradigm for the Bible and Social Justice

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Walter Wink and I were colleagues at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Walter as Assistant Professor of New Testament and I as a Ph.D. candidate, during the wild days of 1968-1974, the Columbia student revolt, the Black Manifesto at Riverside and Union, and the lesser known New Testament tutors strike in the fall of 1970. In the midst of that period, Walter published his 1973 biblical manifesto, *The Bible in Human Transformation* with its famous opening line, “Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt.” Probably as a direct result of that single line, he was denied tenure at Union the next year after its publication, 1974. Several of us wore ribbons on our new Ph.D. robes in protest at the Union commencement of 1974. Walter and I had said virtually those same words to each other during a series of conversations about the need for a new paradigm for biblical study in the spring of 1971 before his sabbatical at the Guild for Psychological Studies in San Francisco that led to *The Bible in Human Transformation*.

A lesser-known manifesto was my dissertation, *Mark, the Storyteller*, which was written in this same period. It was initially rejected and was only accepted as a dissertation after two years of revisions in 1974. It has been revised and published last year as *The Messiah of Peace: A Performance Criticism Commentary on Mark’s Passion-Resurrection Narrative*. It was a revolutionary period and we were scholarly revolutionaries or perhaps better stated, we tried to be scholarly revolutionaries. Only time will tell whether we brought about substantial change. Paradigm shifts of this magnitude in biblical studies take a long time and usually involve significant personal cost.

In this presentation, I want to outline the ongoing evolution of the new paradigm for biblical study and interpretation that Walter and I discussed and pursued, each in different ways, beginning in the early '70's and continuing throughout our lives. Since you all are more familiar with Walter's work, most importantly his three volume series on the Powers, I will devote most of the time here to this recent publication of mine. However, the phrase, *The Messiah of Peace*, and the new perspective on Mark it embodies, grows directly out of Walter's seminal work in the Powers series. His identification of Jesus' third way of non-violent resistance to the powers of this evil age and his exposition of the pervasive belief in the myth of redemptive violence, in the biblical period and now, are central to this new work.

As in Walter and June's workshops, the practice of biblical storytelling invites a dialectic between an "objective" listening to a story in its original historical context and a "subjective" interiorization and exploration of the connections of the story with personal and communal experience now. And just as the Wink workshops were conducted across the U.S. and around the world, so also biblical storytelling workshops have been conducted all over the world by members of the Network of Biblical Storytellers International. Walter and I even did a week-long workshop together at Auburn in which we explored the interaction between our two models of biblical workshops that invite the intersection between biblical traditions and the lived experience of people now.

A central dimension of my work has been an investigation of the relationship between the biblical tradition and the history of communication technology, often called the media. This research has been developed by the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media research group in SBL that I founded in 1983 and led for the next seven years. At last

count, there were some 20 groups in SBL pursuing the various dimensions of the research agenda introduced by BAMM. Incidentally, a new work will be published next year by T&T Clark, *The Dictionary of the Bible in Ancient Media*.

A new framework for the study of the Bible has emerged from the investigation of the Bible in ancient media that has major implications for the Bible and social justice. We as a scholarly community have assumed that the Bible was originally a library of texts that were read by readers, usually individual readers reading the texts alone and in silence. Thus, references to “the reader” and “the text” are ubiquitous in biblical commentaries and monographs. Recent research has revealed that literacy in the ancient world was very limited. Current estimates of literacy in the first century are that 90-95% of persons were functionally illiterate. The works recorded in the Bible were compositions of sound organized in units of breath. The publication of literary compositions took place by being performed for audiences either with or without a manuscript. But with or without a manuscript, the performances were from memory. In as far as biblical scholarship has presupposed a “silent text” framework for the composition and publication of the Bible and has studied the Bible in a textual paradigm, we have been engaged in a massive media anachronism in which we have read back into the ancient world the practices of a much later media culture.

Modern brain research makes it clear that there are different sensory registers in the brain for visual and auditory sense data. We literally perceive a different Bible if we hear the compositions performed than if we examine the texts with our eyes. Our current practice is directly analogous to examining the musical scores of Bach and Mozart and

never listening to the music. If we want to perceive the Bible in its original historical context, we have to perform it and listen to it.

The formation of the social memory of the ancient communities of the “big tent” of Israelite religion was central to the maintenance and integrity of their communities. And in the faction of Israelites inspired by Jesus, the learning and telling of the stories of Israel and the stories of Jesus and the early church decisively changed the relationship between Israel’s religion and the world of the Gentiles and specifically the Romans. The church eventually transformed some of the major social institutions of the Roman world such as the gladiatorial games and sex slavery of the vanquished. . It also established charities for the poor and the sick and established communities of rich and poor, slave and free, Israelites and Gentiles.

In our present paradigm, the role of biblical texts in the pursuit of social justice is to provide ideological/theological content and perspectives. The Bible functions as a reference source of historical data and theological ideas. Its function is reflected in the library. The hope is that biblical scholars and social activists will come to this library and gain new perspectives that will strengthen and inspire corporate action by the study of the texts here.

The learning and telling of biblical traditions sheds new light on the impact of these ancient compositions in their original context. But it also, potentially, changes the relationship between the Bible and the quest for social justice and peace. The Bible as lived and internalized performance literature can get the traditions of the Bible out of the book and into the world of 21<sup>st</sup> century “media.” We have not yet figured out how to do this. But the possibility is there when the Bible is treated as performance literature that

lives in the air between people. This would address the failure of the American Christian left to develop a television presence that has left the most powerful communication system in the culture to the Christian right with all of the consequences we are currently experiencing for the perversion of Christianity.

Let me then summarize the basic results of the study of the Gospel of Mark as performance literature and as indicated by the title of the new commentary, a study of Mark's story of The Messiah of Peace.

First, Mark was composed and organized as sound with mnemonic links to facilitate memorization and recital. The sound map of the story reveals that it was composed in breath units of cola and periods that were the basic units of Greek composition described by the major Greek rhetorical treatises such as Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, Dionysius Halicarnassus's *De compositione verborum*, and the anonymous *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*. The structures of composition are designed to enable the audiences to remember the story and to build to the rhetorical climaxes that were the goal of every Greek rhetorician and storyteller.

Second, when Mark is heard as addressed to audiences, the analysis of audience address reveals that the audiences of Mark were addressed as Judeans, not as Gentile Christians, as has been the operative presupposition of the major Markan commentaries. The characterization of the audience occurs when the storyteller presents the words of a character, in the Gospels usually Jesus, and addresses the audience as the object of Jesus' words. The audience is then invited to hear Jesus' words as that character and in effect to "become" that character. Let me show you how it works. Telling of the paralytic story. The way in which the story is usually read makes the scribes an enemy from whom the

audience is invited to be alienated. I can show you how to do it. This way of reading the story grows out of the assumption that Mark's story was anti-Jewish and that the scribes were Mark's enemy rather than representatives of a major faction in Judean communities who are being included in the story.

When experienced as addressed to predominantly Judean audiences, the Gospel is no sense anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. It is heartily pro-Judean and represents another faction in the big tent of 1<sup>st</sup> century Israelite religion, a peace faction that followed the policy of non-violent resistance and peacemaking embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Third, Mark was composed in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish-Roman war. The war was the greatest tragedy in the history of Israel: between 1,100,00 to 1,500,000 killed. The war was the direct result of a rebellion fueled by hatred of Rome and of rebellion against Israel's domination by "the nations," that is, the Gentiles. The Gospel is structured as a celebration of Jesus' strategy of loving and doing good for Judeans and Gentiles. In Mark Jesus first heals, feeds, and drives out demons from Judeans: a man with an unclean spirit in the Capernaum synagogue, Simon's mother in law, the sick and demon possessed of Capernaum, a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand, a woman with a flow of blood, the daughter of Jairus a synagogue elder.

The one exception to this series of Judeans is the Gerasene demoniac, a Gentile possessed by "the legion" who were driven into a herd of swine. It is a thoroughly Israelite story and the beneficiary is a Gentile. After Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees about the purity laws in which he declared all foods clean, there are a series of stories about Jesus doing good for his enemies: the Syro-Phoenician woman and her demon

possessed daughter, a deaf and dumb man, the sick and demon possessed in the towns and villages of the Decapolis, feeding four thousand, and healing the blind man of Bethsaida. Notice the way in which Jesus first expresses his solidarity with the Israel's self designation as the children of God before granting this pushy Gentile woman's begging for mercy for her daughter. The story.

For the supporters of the war in Israel in the aftermath of the war, this was treason. The controversies in the background of these stories evoke many of the dynamics of current political conflicts in Israel now about policy toward the Palestinians and the assassination of Itzak Rabin who made peace with "the enemy of Israel." Furthermore, these stories precede the Messianic confession and Jesus' prediction of his death and his advocacy of his disciples taking up their own crosses of non-violent resistance.

The proximate cause of the successful conspiracy to kill Jesus is his non-violent demonstration in the Temple. After turning over the tables of the moneychangers and pigeon sellers in the court of the Gentiles, he first quotes Isaiah: "Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer among all the nations." And then Jeremiah, "But you have made it a den of *lāstās*. This Greek word is usually translated "robbers, thieves, or brigands." But in the post war context it was heard also as a reference to the coalition of revolutionary groups that formed the Zealot revolt as is reflected in Josephus' frequent use of the term *lāstās* in *The Jewish War*. The radicality of Mark's inclusion of the phrase, "among all the nations," may be indicated by its elimination by Matthew and Luke. The idea of the Temple as a universal house of prayer for all the nations was a radical idea then and now.

The Gospel of Mark is, therefore, most appropriately heard in the context of the post-war period and the controversies in the community of Israel about how to survive in the aftermath of this cataclysmic tragedy. To oversimplify, the rabbis formed a movement of Israelites who later called themselves Jews to separate the community from the Gentiles by a communal and personal life that maintained the purity of the Temple and the traditions of the liberal Pharisees and the school of Hillel as embodied by Johanan ben Zakkai. The followers of Jesus who were later called Christians led a movement to reconcile the community of Jews with the Gentiles by forming communities of Jews and Gentiles who worshipped the God of Israel and pursued social justice for the world embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

The major background of Mark's story of Jesus as the Messiah is with the prior dominant Messianic traditions of Israel. From Saul to Josiah, all of the anointed ones of Israel, the Messiahs, were warriors. Jesus is made present in the telling of the Gospel as a wholly non-violent Messiah who accepted arrest, condemnation, and crucifixion rather than engage in violence.

The culmination of this story of non-violence is the Pilate trial. The story is structured by what can be called the rhetoric of implication, a rhetorical structure grounded in the storytelling traditions of Israel. In the rhetoric of implication, the stories of a highly sympathetic character lead the audience into a high degree of sympathetic identification with the character. That character then does something that is clearly identified in the norms of the story as wrong. The storytelling experience of this structure is to shock the audience into reflection about this clearly identified wrong.



Examples in the storytelling traditions of Israel are the story of the man and the woman in the garden, the people of Israel making and worshipping the golden calf at Mount Sinai, the story of David and Bathsheba and Nathan's parable of the lamb of the poor man, and the story of Jonah. The impact of this rhetoric is identified clearly in David's response to Nathan, the people's response to Moses' rage.

In the New Testament this rhetoric is present in the story of Pentecost and Peter's first sermon: "And they were cut to the heart and said, "What shall we do, men, brothers?" In Mark, the rhetoric of implication is most vividly embodied in the stories of Peter and the disciples running away and denying Jesus, the women running away from the empty tomb and saying nothing to anyone, and the crowd choosing Barabbas and demanding the crucifixion of Jesus. The crowd is the most unambiguously sympathetic character in the entire story. They chase him around the sea, listen to his teaching, and are always enthusiastic about his words and actions culminating in their support for him after the Temple demonstration and the parable of the wick tenants. As a result, when the crowd asks for Barabbas and demands Jesus' crucifixion, the impact for the audience is the shock of realization of the continuity between the nation's choice of war and violence in 66 CE and the choice of Barabbas and, most important, the nation's rejection of Jesus' way of peace and reconciliation with Israel's enemies.

We need then to imagine the Gospel of Mark being told by storytellers who learned the story from the few available manuscripts and told it in a 2-2 1/2 hour storytelling event. The story was an appeal to follow Jesus and to reject the myth of redemptive violence that formed the core belief by the coalition of Judean revolutionary forces who believed that violent, zealous warfare would be supported by God and was the

only way in which we could be liberated from the powers of evil. That was the core belief system shared by both the Judean and the Roman armies.

It follows further that the purpose of the composition of the Gospel was to empower a network of storytellers who would tell the story in a wide variety of settings throughout the Greco-Roman world. That purpose is reflected in Jesus' so-called apocalyptic discourse just prior to the passion narrative and in the story of the anointing at Bethany by a woman: 13:10 "and the gospel must first be proclaimed to all the nations" and 14:9 "wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world." The horizons for the telling of the story were not small Christian communities that told their sacred stories to each other. The horizons of the telling of the Gospel were to the nations, that is, our enemies, the Gentiles, and to the whole world. Storytelling and the reformation of the social memory of communities was a central strategy for the establishment of a new age of peace and justice.

What are then the implications of this new paradigm for the interpretation of Mark for the Library and Center for the Bible and Social Justice? I'll name three:

1. In addition to the development of the Library and Center as a center for textual research, the Center could also be a center for the training and empowerment of storytellers and for workshops in both the Wink and the Boomershine models. Such a center would also do research on the Bible and social justice in ancient and modern media. It could also provide experiences of the performance of the compositions of the Bible such as the Gospel of Mark, perhaps in conjunction with performances of the Quran.

2. Just as Mark utilized the power of the emerging communication system of literacy for the communication of the vision of a new system of social justice, the Center could sponsor and enable the production of video and multi-media biblical resources for social action in the world.
3. Jesus' vision of the purpose of the Temple, according to Mark, was that it would be a place of prayer for all the nations. The Center could also be a center of prayer and meditation for peace and justice for the religions of the world.

When the Bible is conceived as a series of oral compositions performed for audiences rather than a library of texts read by individual readers in silence, new perspectives are generated for both the meaning and impact of the Bible in its original historical context and for the potential role of the Bible in the quest for social justice in its contemporary context.