

## Oral Tradition and the New Testament

*For inexperienced audiences, an oral-derived text must signal its performance arena rhetorically: “the ‘place’ where the work is experienced by a reader, the event that is re-created, must be summoned solely by textual signals” (Foley 1995:80; see 79–82). As text and audience become further removed from the text’s oral tradition, the presence and consequence of the performance arena for the text’s reception become increasingly irrelevant. However, as we will see with respect to Mark 1, written texts can suggest their appropriate context of reception for readers who are familiar with the texts’ larger traditional context.*

See Also: *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: (Guides for the Perplexed; Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014)*

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The New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven texts that were written in the first (and possibly early-second) century CE and brought together over the next three centuries. However, recent advances in research into oral tradition and performance offer us great potential for understanding how these written texts functioned as acts of communication among their earliest audiences. For example, the dynamics of oral tradition and performance may help us explain an unexpected word in Mark’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. The NRSV translates Mark 1.12–13: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited

on him.” The phrase “drove out” in v. 12 translates the Greek word *ekballō*, which can be used to describe forcible compulsion (“force to leave”) but can also describe sending or bringing something out without the connotation of force. Commentators have found Mark’s choice of *ekballō* striking, however, because it often occurs in the context of an exorcism to describe the forcible expulsion of demons and/or unclean spirits from a person possessed. The peculiarity of Mark’s word choice stands out even more because Matthew and Luke, in their parallels to Mark 1.12, use variations of a less marked word (Matthew uses “led up” [*anagō*]; Luke uses “led” [*agō*]).

Craig Evans explains the differences between Mark 1.12 and Matt. 4.1|Luke 4.1 in terms of Markan priority and Matthew’s and Luke’s “stylistic improvements upon Mark” (Evans 2004:5–6). According to Evans, when Mark wrote that Jesus ventured into the wilderness under inspiration of God’s Spirit, he used the relatively marked word, “drove” (or “cast out”; *ekballō*). Later, Matthew and Luke set out to write their own gospels. When they read Mark’s striking phrase, “And immediately the Spirit cast him out into the wilderness,” Matthew and Luke independently chose to use less marked language, so that Jesus “was led up into the wilderness by the Spirit” (Matt. 4.1), or he “was being led by the Spirit in the wilderness” (Luke 4.1). Evans finds this scenario much more plausible than the alternative, that Mark saw Matthew’s and Luke’s “led [up]” and made the editorial decision to use the more difficult language of “casting out.”

I agree with Evans that Markan priority—the theory that Mark was written before Matthew and Luke and that the latter two used Mark as a written source—provides a more coherent explanation of the synoptic Gospels’ similarities and differences than does the Owen-Griesbach Hypothesis (the theory that Mark was written after Matthew and Luke and used the

latter two as written sources). Even so, Evans’s explanations of all three texts (Mark 1.12; Matt. 4.1; Luke 4.1) are unconvincing. In other contexts, both Matthew and Luke use *ekballō* to describe the same or similar kinds of action as Mark 1.12, so we have no reason for thinking that either author would have perceived *ekballō* in Mark 1.12 as a poor word choice.<sup>1</sup> But Evans’s explanation of Mark is even less compelling:

Mark 1:12 is Mark’s first use of *ekballō*. *It did not occur to him that he would subsequently use this word in reference to exorcism* [my emphasis]. Had the Evangelist narrated (or *read* in Matthew or Luke, if we accept the Owen-Griesbach Hypothesis) one or two exorcisms *before* narrating the temptation, he too may have chosen a different verb, as Matthew and Luke would later do. (Evans 2004:6)

On what grounds can we suppose Mark did not know *ekballō* conveyed strong exorcistic connotations and would not have used it at 1.12 if he had? Since Mark uses *ekballō* so prolifically in exorcistic contexts, we can be fairly confident that, already in 1.12, Mark knew that *ekballō* could mean, “to cast out,” or even, “to exorcise.”

As I mentioned above, I think oral traditional research and its insights can help us here.

But first, we need to define three important terms:

- **REGISTER** The “special language,” whether oral or written, dedicated to expressing a particular subject or type of subject. With respect to the questions of oral tradition and the NT, the term “register” refers to the linguistic features deemed appropriate for particular kinds of communication (expressing the Jesus tradition, or communicating across expanded distances by written letters, and so on). The key feature of a distinctive traditional register, however, is not its unique words, phrases, and expressions, but rather the “institutionalized meanings” conveyed by means of those words, phrases, and expressions (see Foley 1995:49–53), as we will explain with respect to *ekballō* in Mark 1.12.

- **PERFORMANCE ARENA** The place where oral performance takes place, “where words are invested with their special power” (Foley 1995:47; see 47–49). For actual oral performances, the performance arena refers to a physical location—the site of the performance event—including especially any ritualistic aspects of the site. However, for oral-derived text, “performance arena” refers to the “place” in which readers and/or audiences imagine themselves as they read and/or experience the text. An audience experienced with the actual oral tradition of an oral-derived text can summon the memory of the literal performance arena in their reception of the oral-derived text. But for inexperienced audiences, an oral-derived text must signal its performance arena rhetorically: “the ‘place’ where the work is experienced by a reader, the event that is re-created, must be summoned solely by textual signals” (Foley 1995:80; see 79–82). As text and audience become further removed from the text’s oral tradition, the presence and consequence of the performance arena for the text’s reception become increasingly irrelevant. However, as we will see with respect to Mark 1, written texts can suggest their appropriate context of reception for readers who are familiar with the texts’ larger traditional context.
- **COMMUNICATIVE ECONOMY** The ability of a word or phrase to take on additional meaning(s) traditional contexts, for example in an oral traditional performance or an oral-derived text. Under the right social, rhetorical, and performative conditions, words or phrases can function “as an index-point or node in a grand, untextualizable network of traditional associations. Activation of any single node brings into play an enormous wellspring of meaning that can be tapped in no other way, no matter how talented or assiduous the performer may be” (Foley 1995:54). Our discussion of Mark 1.12 will

demonstrate the communicative economy of words, phrases, and themes in a performance arena as we trace the way a single word can evoke an entire narrative.

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A number of textual features suggest already that Mark has entered—rhetorically rather than actually—the performance arena and has switched to the dedicated register of his tradition. The mention of “the beginning (*archē*) of the gospel” (Mark 1.1) makes sense on a strictly textual, denotative level. This is, after all, “the beginning” of the narrative of Jesus’ life and teaching, which Mark calls a “gospel” (*euangelion*). However, for an audience with ears to hear, the Markan incipit (as Mark 1.1 is often called) strikes resonances with Hebrew biblical tradition. The Book of the Twelve opens with the prophecies of Hosea, and the book of Hosea opens with two introductory sentences. The opening of Mark’s Gospel echoes the second of Hosea’s introductory sentences:

<b>Mark 1.1</b>	<b>Hosea 1.2 [LXX]</b>
The beginning of the gospel ( <i>archē tou euangeliou</i> ) of Jesus Christ, the son of God.	The beginning of the word ( <i>archē logou</i> ) of the Lord, which came to Hosea.

**Table 1: Mark 1.1||Hos. 1.2 [LXX]**

The prophetic resonance of the beginning of Mark’s Gospel becomes explicit in the second verse, which cites the written prophetic tradition and which specifies the Isaianic tradition as its traditional referent: “Just as it is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet” (Mark 1.2). Moreover, immediately after he names Isaiah the prophet, Mark famously goes on to cite not Isaiah but Malachi (the last prophet included in the Book of the Twelve):

<b>Mark 1.2</b>	<b>Malachi 3.1 [LXX]</b>
Behold, I am sending my messenger before	Behold, I am sending out my messenger,

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you, who will prepare your way.	and he will attend to the way before me.
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Table 2: Mark 1.2||Mal. 3.1 [LXX]

Commentators often focus on the difficulty of the fact that Mark refers to Isaiah but quotes from Malachi, and understandably so. But we should not miss the effect of Mark’s “error”:<sup>2</sup> In his opening three verses, Mark resonates with the opening of the Book of the Twelve (v. 1), mentions Isaiah’s written prophecy by name, alludes to the closing chapter of the Book of the Twelve (v. 2), and cites an actual Isaianic passage with considerable accuracy (v. 3). And, of course, Malachi’s reference to Elijah (3.22 LXX) and Mark’s application of Mal. 3.1/Isa. 40.3 to John will set the groundwork for Jesus’ link between John and Elijah in Mark 9.11–13.

When Mark finally begins his narrative in v. 4, he has signaled to his audience the enabling referent of his performance: Israel’s prophetic tradition. By the time John comes on stage, the prophetic tradition is fully present as Mark describes John, “baptizing *in the wilderness* and proclaiming a baptism *of repentance* for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1.4). The italicized phrases interact with their enabling referent to call much larger narratives to mind. These “larger narratives” include Israel’s journey into the Sinai wilderness, the covenant with the Lord, and of course the covenantal consequences found, for example, in Deuteronomy 30.<sup>3</sup> Mark reinforces this traditional context in v. 6 by portraying John in Elijah’s dress, which reactivates the Elijah resonance from v. 2.

So how does Mark’s modulation to the traditional register (with all the communicative economy of that register, as we have suggested for terms like “beginning,” “wilderness,” and “repentance” in vv. 1–4) and his rhetorical invocation of the traditional performance arena position us to understand the Spirit’s strange “casting out” of Jesus into the wilderness in Mark 1.12? Israel’s exodus tradition provides an important answer. Exodus (LXX) uses *ekballō* some

fourteen times, all in a relatively coherent fashion. First, we find some unruly shepherds “driving away” (*ekballō*) the daughters of the priest of Midian from a well until Moses arrives, rescues the women, and waters their sheep (Exod. 2.17). Nothing about Mark’s narrative of Jesus evokes this episode, so we move on. The next five occurrences of *ekballō* all concern Pharaoh’s (and the Egyptians’) eventual “expulsion” of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt. These five uses of *ekballō* differ significantly from Mark 1.12. The people who oppress God’s people are doing the *ekballō*-ing in Exodus, whereas in Mark the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. We should note, however, that YHWH says—even promises—to Moses, “Now you will see the things I will do to Pharaoh, for with a mighty hand he will send them out, and with an uplifted arm he will expel (*ekballō*) them from his land” (Exod. 6.1 LXX). In other words, Pharaoh drives out the Israelites *at YHWH’s impulse*. The final eight uses of *ekballō* in Exodus describe the Lord’s promise to “drive out” the nations from the land he promised to Abraham and his descendants.<sup>4</sup> These also relate to Mark 1.12 only dimly. Now God himself does the expelling (as in Mark 1.12), but those being driven out are pagan gentiles, hardly an appropriate resonance for the Spirit’s act of driving *Jesus* out into the wilderness.

These results seem frustrating at first. And yet, if we can expand our vision beyond our strictly textual frame of reference, we begin to see an important theme emerge. In the very first use of *ekballō*, Moses “rises up” (*anistēmi*) and “rescues” (*rhyomai*) Reuel’s daughters. In the next five uses of *ekballō*, the Lord provokes Israel’s oppressors to expel his people from Egypt, which elsewhere is described as an act of rescue (*rhyomai*; see Exod. 6.6; 12.27; 14.30). Finally, in the last eight uses of *ekballō* the Lord promises to make the people’s rescue complete by driving out the gentiles from the land of Canaan in a fashion that leaves the land fit for Israel to

inhabit (see Exod. 23.29). As a whole, then, *ekballō* occurs at every stage of YHWH’s redemption of his people Israel from the hand of Pharaoh.

Famously, however, Israel failed to rely on YHWH’s power or faithfulness to provide for and lead the people in the wilderness. We ought to ask why Mark would use the same word—*ekballō*—to narrate the Spirit’s impulse on Jesus out into the wilderness and why Mark would turn to Israel’s exodus tradition as the appropriate context for understanding the first temptation of Christ. More importantly, we ought to ask how an audience steeped in and formed by the tradition of Israel’s rescue from Egypt might have experienced Mark’s use of the same word to narrate the Spirit’s impulse on Jesus. The answer to both questions is: Contrast. Israel, driven out into the wilderness for forty years, faces testing and in turn tests the Lord,<sup>5</sup> and a generation falls in the desert. On the other hand, Jesus, driven out into the wilderness for forty days, faces testing by Satan and danger from wild beasts, and he emerges from the ordeal with the angels of the Lord serving him (Mark 1.12–13). In the Exodus tradition, *ekballō* summons the entire narrative of Israel’s cries from Egypt, the confrontation between YHWH and Pharaoh, the escort out into the wilderness, and God’s promise that he would clear the land as the people advanced. Mark taps this much larger narrative with extreme economy, indeed by simply using one unexpected word.

Before we finish, we ought to consider whether Matthew and/or Luke offer any confirmation of this reading of Mark 1.12. Since neither Matthew nor Luke use *ekballō*, both Gospels lose this highly economic, metonymic link with the tradition of Israel’s wandering (= testing) in the wilderness. However, both evangelists counteract this loss by expanding their own performances of Jesus’ temptation, explicitly and overtly citing the tradition of Israel in the wilderness three times!<sup>6</sup> Whether Matthew and Luke decided independently to expand on Mark’s

account of the temptation (and so incorporated traditions from a now-lost source, which scholars refer to as “Q”),<sup>7</sup> or Matthew alone expanded on Mark and Luke followed Matthew,<sup>8</sup> we have evidence that very early readers of Mark recognized the function of Israel’s exodus tradition—the enabling referent—as the context within which Mark 1.12–13 achieves its fullest and most meaningful interpretation. If Mark did not use the strange verb *ekballō* in v. 12 because of its traditional connotations, he could hardly have faulted his readers for activating those connotations in their reception of his performance.

For a more comprehensive introduction to the field of biblical media criticism, see my forthcoming volume, *Oral Tradition and the New Testament* (Guides for the Perplexed; Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

## WORKS CITED

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<sup>1</sup> In Matt. 9.38 Jesus instructs the disciples, “Pray, therefore, of the lord of the harvest, that he would cast out [*ekbalē*] workers into his harvest” (see also Matt. 9.25; 12.20, 35; 13.52). The parallel passage in Luke 10.2 is identical, with only the slightest difference in word order (see also Luke 10.35). This makes Matt. 9.38||Luke 10.2 a Q passage. If Evans’s explanation of Matthew’s and Luke’s redaction of Mark 1.12 is right, why have neither of our evangelists similarly redacted Q 10.2?

<sup>2</sup> I appreciate that many readers will be uncomfortable referring to Mark 1.2 as an “error.” For this reason, I have used quotation marks to acknowledge that we can explain this verse in ways other than saying that Mark made a mistake. Nevertheless, even those of us with a “high view of Scripture” need to be able to recognize that, in any other circumstance, if someone claims to quote one author and instead quotes another, we usually and normally call that an “error” or a “mistake.”

<sup>3</sup> For example, “And it shall come to pass, whenever all these words come upon you—the blessing as well as the curse which I have set before you—and you will receive them into your heart among all the nations, wherever the Lord scatters you, and you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice in all these words, as much as I am commanding you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, and the Lord will heal your sins and have mercy upon you, and again he will gather you from all the nations, to whom the Lord scattered you” (Deut. 30.1–3 LXX).

<sup>4</sup> See Exod. 23.18, 28–31 (4x); 33.2; 34.11, and 34.24.

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., Deut. 8.2: “And you shall remember the entire way, on which the Lord your God led you in the wilderness, so that he would afflict you and test you (*ekpeirasē se*), and the things that are in your heart might be discerned, whether or not you would keep his commandments” (LXX).

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 4.4||Luke 4.4 cite Deut. 8.3; Matt. 4.7||Luke 4.12 cite Deut. 6.16; Matt. 4.10||Luke 4.8 cite Deut. 6.13.

<sup>7</sup> The majority of NT scholars accept some version of the Two- (or Four-)Source Theory, which affirms (i) Markan priority and (ii) Matthew’s and Luke’s independent use of Mark and a now-lost source, Q.

<sup>8</sup> A growing minority of NT scholars, led especially by Mark Goodacre, accept the Farrer Theory, which affirms (i) Markan priority and (ii) Luke’s use of both Mark and Matthew.