

The Performed Text

Introduction

Biblical Performance Criticism is a way of understanding the Bible. It is the result of many streams of thought meeting over the last century, including form criticism, oral-tradition studies, rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, memory studies, media studies, and performance studies. In some way, each of these streams analyzes four elements: (1) someone speaking, (2) someone hearing, (3) a text, and (4) a social situation. Each has contributed to the understanding that the Bible should be read in terms of the interaction of those four elements rather than any one of them in isolation.

- *Form criticism*, developed at the end of the nineteenth century, is based on the fact that biblical authors drew on oral traditions to compose their writings. Form critics try to classify a passage by its genre or form (e.g., parables, pithy sayings, conflict stories) and to find the social situation in which that form might have been used.¹

1. Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) is usually credited for conceiving form criticism, which was further developed by Martin Noth, Gerhard von Rad, and Claus Westermann for the Hebrew Bible, and by Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann for the New Testament. For an

- *Oral-tradition studies* emerged in the 1930s from the discovery that Bosnian folk storytellers used repeated scene types and formulas in a way that reminded scholars of Homer’s Greek epic stories, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. With these set scene types and formulas, a storyteller could easily remember a story and adapt it for each new audience. It was natural that biblical scholars started to look for similar techniques in the Bible.²
- *Rhetoric* is the art of persuasion. Rhetorical critics analyze the way biblical authors try to persuade an audience. We know from ancient training books for speakers that they were taught to persuade not only with reason, but also with emotion. Speakers used the influence of personal characteristics, such as their virtue or standing in the community. Some speakers during biblical times used the sound of words to delight an audience, for example, by beginning a phrase with words that all begin with the same sound. Gestures, movement, and facial expressions were important to clarify and emphasize what was said.³ Telling stories is one of the most common ways the Bible is shared. *Narrative criticism* provides indispensable tools to analyze how biblical texts are stories with characters, setting, time, plot, point of view, and standards of judgment.⁴

helpful summary of scholarship up to 1986 with a focus on form criticism, see Robert C. Culley, “Oral Tradition and Biblical Studies,” *Oral Tradition* 1, no. 1 (1986): 30-65. It can be accessed online at http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/1i/3_culley.pdf. The articles at [oraltradition.org](http://journal.oraltradition.org) are a treasure trove worth exploring.

2. Milman Parry developed the “oral-formulaic” theory that his student, Albert B. Lord, elaborated on in *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), and which Walter Ong and John Miles Foley further developed. Werner Kelber brought it into biblical studies in *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), as did Susan Niditch in her *Oral World and Written Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996). See also Raymond F. Person, “The Role of Memory in the Tradition Represented by the Deuteronomic History and the Book of Chronicles,” *Oral Tradition* 26, no. 2 (October 2011): 537–50, <http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26ii/person>.
3. What I am describing is sometimes called “historic rhetorical criticism,” perhaps first used by Hans Dieter Betz in *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Whitney Shiner used rhetorical handbooks in preparing his own performance of Mark; see his *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003). William David Shiell studied the persuasive use of gestures based on rhetorical handbooks in *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). Kathy Maxwell has studied how ancient rhetoricians anticipated audience interaction in *Hearing Between the Lines: The Audience as Fellow-Worker in Luke-Acts and Its Literary Milieu* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).
4. See David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Mitchie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative*

- *Memory studies* examine how memory is a social reality, shaped by how groups of people organize space and time and communicate these memories inside and outside the group. People collectively build and maintain memories by sharing what happened, correcting and elaborating the telling, and then retelling the memories. Some write a memory down, often as a way to remember it in a particular way or to share it to distant groups. These written memories often reflect techniques used to help remember complex material.⁵
- *Media studies* analyzes the way the medium of communication affects communication. Especially as television became more popular in the last half of the twentieth century, people became more aware of how the medium shaped the way both speakers spoke and hearers heard. Speakers were seen! Today, we have not only print media, but live radio, recorded audio, recorded video, live streaming video, and hyperlinked Internet resources. Few would go as far as Marshall McLuhan to say “the medium is the message,” but scholars of media studies have helped us understand the possibilities and limitations of different media. Anyone who has seen a movie of a Bible story knows that the media of film is different than an experience of the printed page.⁶
- *Performance studies* emerged out of theater studies and cultural anthropology to analyze any embodied action that is rehearsed and performed. “All the world’s a stage,” Shakespeare said. Performance studies looks everywhere for performances: in the home, in the

of a Gospel, 3d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012); Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); and James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

5. Maurice Halbwachs initiated the modern study of social memory in 1925, followed by Jan Assman (who uses the term “cultural memory”). Birger Gerhardsson introduced memory as a category for understanding the transmission of the Gospels in 1961 with *Memory and Manuscript* (repub.: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). See Tom Thatcher, *Why John Wrote a Gospel: Jesus—Memory—History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), and the collection edited by Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005).
6. In 1987, Tom Boomershine was one of the first to reflect on media in biblical interpretation. See his “Biblical Megatrends: Towards a Paradigm for the Interpretation of the Bible in Electronic Media,” in *SBL Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 144–57. John Miles Foley’s Pathways Project is an exploration of the similarities and differences between Internet media and oral tradition. See www.pathwaysproject.org, and his book *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

classroom, in the marketplace, in religious gatherings, and everywhere people repeat behaviors for a group.⁷

Form criticism, oral-tradition studies, rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, memory studies, media studies, and performance studies are seven ways of interpreting the Bible that contribute to what we are calling “biblical performance criticism.” But all this sounds very abstract.

The concrete experience of performing a biblical passage has had an impact on me and others who have prepared, internalized, and performed for audiences. When scholars, pastors, teachers, and students have gone beyond the silent and individual interaction with the Bible, it has changed their way of thinking about it and the tasks of studying and teaching it. David Rhoads, Tom Boomershine, Margaret Lee, Whitney Shiner, Pam Faro, and James Maxey, to name a few, will never read the Bible in the same way again because they have performed biblical material. I began memorizing and performing Bible passages as a pastor. During my study of the book of Revelation, I translated and memorized it for performance. I have now performed it over a dozen times to different audiences, and each concrete performance event has given me new insights. *This book is an attempt to communicate the payoff for performing passages from the Bible and to persuade the reader to give it a try.*

The Bible is very concrete. It tells specific stories about people’s experiences with God and is itself a response to encounters with God. It portrays named and unnamed people responding to one another in specific situations. It is used today in encounters with God in devotion, prayer, and worship. People use it to comfort and to persuade others in concrete situations.

Therefore, to be concrete and get at the breadth of what we mean by

7. Richard Schneckner (theater studies), Ervin Goffman (sociology), and Victor Turner (cultural anthropology) are often thought of as the parents of performance studies. See Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3d ed. (London: Routledge, 2013). For two examples of the impact on performance studies in biblical studies, see William Doan and Terry Giles, *Prophets, Performance, and Power* (London: Continuum, 2005), and Jeanette Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk: Faithful Re-Enactment in the Midst of Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

“performance,” consider twelve brief scenes, each based on a passage from the Bible or from early Christian writings. In each scene there are four elements: at least one performer, an audience, some reference to a “text,” and a larger situation. These scenes are necessarily brief and not the detailed descriptions that we will strive for later. For each, ask yourself: Who is the performer? Who is the audience? How do audience and performer interact? What is the “text” and what role does it play in the scene? What else do you need to know about the situation to make sense of the scene? With all of these questions in view, what is “performance”?

Scene 1: *A father and his son sit in the shade of a tree on a sunny afternoon. The father asks his son to recite the Ten Commandments just as his father had asked him long ago. At first, his son launches quickly into it, “You shall have no other gods . . .” and recites the First, then the Second, and the Third Commandment. But then he hesitates on the first word of the Fourth Commandment, struggling to remember. His father begins to give him a hint, but his son asks, “Why do we do this, Father?” His father sighs. He nods his head before responding, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt. . . .”⁸ After telling the story of the people coming out of Egypt, the father resumes jogging his son’s memory.*

This scene imagines Deut 6:20–24 in practice at some unspecified location at some unknown time. One way to describe it would be to say that the son is the performer who is asked to recite the Ten Words (more commonly known today as the “Ten Commandments” found in Deut 5:6–21) for his father, the audience. But we could also say the father is the performer and the son the audience. The son triggers his father’s performance by the question, “Why do we do this?” and

8. See Proverbs 3 and Tobit 4 for other examples of fathers teaching their sons. David Carr shows how education was enculturation into a way of being. This education enculturation happened primarily in the context of family, first with proverbs and other kinds of wisdom literature for making wise choices, but later to enculturate Torah obedience. The instruction was oral and memorized. Recitation developed memory. Written materials supported education, even if not always accessed directly. Although most likely applicable only to elites and their families, Deuteronomy sets the goal of Torah education in every Jewish home no matter what socioeconomic position, an ideal that was picked up during Hasmonean rule (164–163 BCE). David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

the father responds. He accepts the reversal of roles and becomes the performer. He performs a traditional response, which we now may find in Deut 6:20–24, but we have to admit that there is nothing with writing on it anywhere in the scene. The son is expected to have the “text” in his memory, not on a piece of paper. The father does not have a script in front of him, but remembers a traditional response that he was taught. Can we still call Deuteronomy 5 and 6 the “text” of this scene even though both father and son learned them completely by memory without a written reference? Does a “text” need to be present or even exist for this to be considered a performance? There are many details left out of the scene that would shape the impact of the event. If this scene was between an Israelite father and son during a peaceful time, say, in Solomon’s early rule, the son’s question may simply reflect his boredom. If the scene took place during a time when there was pressure for Jews to follow Greek customs, the son’s question may be laced with fear and the father’s nod may express recognition of the danger of publically expressing their faith. Performance in this scene means the father is enculturating his son, that is, he is developing in his son the values, attitudes, and behaviors of a group of people.

Scene 2: Solomon may have built the temple in Jerusalem, but David organized the supplies needed to build it and the musicians who would play the instruments and sing about the great things God has done. It is a family affair: for example, a priest-musician Heman’s fourteen sons and three daughters are under his direction. There are a variety of players on cymbals, harps, and lyres, while others sing. The scene shifts to Heman directing his children and 271 trained singers. There are students repeating exercises with teachers, each ready to sing aloud a song of thanksgiving and telling of God’s wondrous deeds: “For the Lord is good! God’s steadfast love endures forever, and God’s faithfulness to all generations!” Finally, this ensemble sings for those who have come to the temple. The gathered people follow their lead and respond, “For God is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever!”⁹

Performance may be more recognizable in this scene based on 1

9. Quoting Ps 100:5; see also Ps 26:6–7. For situations using this kind of refrain, see 2 Chr 5:13 and 7:3, and Psalm 118.

Chronicles 25: the performance of instrumental music with singing. As with the father and son in the first scene, Heman and his children are engaged in enculturation: through repetition and practice, he and his children develop the practices of leading others in song. It shapes their identity, their responses to situations, and their relationships to God and one another. The scene shifts from the father teaching his children to the larger group of musicians who are performing and an audience who responds by repeating the refrain. There are no written materials described in the scene. The “text” is only in their memory, although today we may find the refrain many times in the Bible. The musical tune to which they sang these words, however, existed only in their memory and is now lost to us.

Scene 3: Isaiah worked for years as a royal prophet, advising the king with messages from God, the King of the Universe. In 711 BCE, he heard that the Assyrian Empire (ruled by King Sargon II) conquered the city of Ashdod, on the Mediterranean coast, due west of Jerusalem. How will he get the king’s attention that an alliance with Egypt and Ethiopia will not protect Judah from the Assyrians? Desperate times call for desperate measures: the royal prophet takes off all his clothes and goes naked and barefoot “with buttocks uncovered” for three years! To everyone who asks why, he proclaims, “God says the Egyptians and Ethiopians will be carried away naked and barefoot by the Assyrians. If this is what happened to those to whom we fled for help from Assyria, how shall we escape?” Sometimes words aren’t enough to get people’s attention.

There is no exchange of roles in this scene from Isaiah 20: Isaiah is clearly the performer and the audience is the king and all who see his nakedness and inquire. As in the first two scenes, there is a give and take between performer and audience. Isaiah’s body is central: he uses it to get attention, make an emotional impact, communicate without words, and illustrate his point. This exchange is written in what we now call “Isaiah chapter 20,” but the scene describes no written materials.¹⁰ What was his audience’s response? Were they transformed

10. Martti Nissinen writes, “the general conclusion may be drawn that ancient Near Eastern prophecy was basically oral performance, that is, delivery of verbal messages spoken by a prophet. The

by his performance? The book of Isaiah doesn't say. This is not Isaiah's only prophecy, but one in which his body played a critical role. How was his body a part of his other prophetic performances but not described in the text?

Scene 4: Thousands of men and women gather early in the morning in the courtyard inside the fresh, new walls of Jerusalem. The priest Ezra climbs onto a newly constructed wooden platform with his back to the Water Gate, through which people haul water from the spring outside the gate. With six leaders on his right and seven on his left, he unrolls a large scroll: the Torah, the book of the Law of Moses, the instruction for God's people. The people stand up as they see him open the scroll. Before reading, he begins with a prayer, blessing the Lord as the great God and the people answer by saying, "Amen, Amen!" before bowing their faces to the ground in honor of God. Ezra and thirteen other leaders take turns reading from the Law and explaining it so that the people understand its meaning. Thirteen Levites, spread out through the crowd, further teach and explain to the people what it means. As the people begin to understand how they have not been living according to the Law, many break down in tears. But the governor, Nehemiah, won't let them wallow in guilt or fear but encourages gladness that God has given them the Law and that they understand it. They are sent to feast in joy and to share with those who have no food prepared.¹¹

Ezra and the other leaders perform the text of the Law of Moses for the assembled Judeans, a scene described in Neh 8:1–12. Some scholars question what really happened on that day and what really was read, but this is the way Nehemiah 8 tells the story. Ezra is not a solo performer; his is the most famous name to us, but he is reading the text with other leaders. The reading is not continuous, but broken by pauses for explanation. Are the thirteen Levites also performers? They are helping the large crowd understand the reading, expanding and

message could be transmitted orally by one or several go-betweens all the way through, from prophet to destination. Occasionally, but never quite systematically, the spoken word ended up in written form, for different purposes and under varying circumstances." Nissinen, "Spoken, Written, Quoted, and Invented: Orality and Writteness in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*, ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000), 235–71, at 268.

11. See a similar story as Josiah's priests rediscover the Law in 2 Kgs 22:3–13.

illustrating each passage perhaps with their own words and stories, as a jazz musician may riff on a musical theme. The crowd likely has questions to ask these explainers, a further give and take before the reading continues. There is ritual surrounding this reading. Before the reading, Ezra leads them in prayer and they respond with “Amen.” Is this part of the performance? It shapes the situation: the prayer situates the reading in a relationship between the people and God, a relationship of gratitude for all God has done, and a relationship with the agreement of the people. (“Amen” means “yes” or “truly.”) There is a written text: a scroll, and probably a very large one that may have required some help to hold and manage. In addition to the questions during the reading, some of the audience respond with tears, but Nehemiah the governor (not one of the original performers but whose presence adds significance and authority to the reading) assures them of reason for joy and encourages feasting and special attention to those who are without. A festive meal together is an important response by the audience to the performance, with consideration for those in need.

Scene 5: A group has gathered in the public building of a small town in the hills of Galilee.¹² The village covers only a few acres; the group is composed largely of men who have time and influence to gather weekly for a reading from the Torah and the prophets and for teaching. The crowd is eager to hear from a man who grew up in the village. They have heard about his energetic and charismatic teaching in other places. After the Torah portion is read, this Jesus is called forward to read the portion from the prophets. He unrolls the scroll to the place in Isaiah and reads,

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.*

12. Lee I. Levine, “The Synagogues of Galilee,” and David A. Fiensy, “The Galilean Village in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods,” both in *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods, Volume 1: Life, Culture, and Society*, ed. David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 129–50, 177–207, respectively.

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

He rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the person who takes care of the scrolls, and then sits down to teach. The silence is pregnant as people wait for his words, and when he begins to teach he explains that this prophecy applies to him. Every detail applies to his task and purpose. He summarizes, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The people respond to each other with amazement. Comments can be heard throughout the room. But a few begin to wonder aloud about this hometown teacher, asking, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

As with Ezra reading the Law, Jesus holds the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus stands to read and sits to interpret. Isaiah's original performance and situation is a faint echo behind the voice of this new situation. Isaiah proclaimed that he was the one proclaiming a year of freedom to those returning from exile in Babylon. Jesus makes the dramatic claim: this prophecy is about him and his situation! He is the one anointed by the Spirit. He is the one bringing good news. He is the one proclaiming release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. He is the one proclaiming the Lord's favor. Although the words are the same, the performer, the audience and the situation radically affect the meaning. At first the audience responds favorably, but quickly they wonder where this hometown boy comes off claiming so much. Audience responses can be diverse and even change during a performance!

As with the scene from Nehemiah 8, some scholars question the historical accuracy of the scene Luke describes (4:16-22), but such concerns are beside the point for our current purposes. Luke tells his story this way. When Luke 4 is read to an audience, it becomes a performance of Luke's portrayal of Jesus' performance, which includes performance of a passage from Isaiah 61. There are multiple performance events embedded within a performance of Luke 4 (a contemporary performance of Luke, Luke's performance of Jesus,

Jesus' performance of Isaiah). What are the effects of this layered performance event for an audience in a specific situation?

Scene 6: Jesus leads his disciples and a crowd up a mountainside, and begins to speak, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . ." He goes on for about twenty-five minutes, referring to the Torah's instructions about murder, adultery, and divorce. He relates his teaching to ordinary things like salt, lamps, birds, and flowers. He talks about common ways to express faith in God, such as prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor. He speaks freely and passionately in a way that people remember.

Matthew describes this scene, what we now call "the Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5–7), and his audience can easily imagine it: Jesus teaches an audience made up of disciples (people who have an ongoing relationship with him) and others who simply have heard of him and want to hear what he has to say. His teaching is unscripted, in the sense that he has nothing written down and everything committed to memory. Yet, his words seem hardly spontaneous but, rather, planned and composed in his mind. Each saying or story, such as the list of "Blessed are . . ." or comparing followers to salt and light, are building blocks that can be reused and reassembled with other blocks depending on the audience and situation. Matthew's audience can imagine Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" on one occasion and simply "Blessed are the poor" on another, just like preachers who reuse and adapt stories and sayings because they find them effective.

Matthew writes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" in his Gospel, while Luke writes simply, "Blessed are the poor." Perhaps they each have heard many versions and have produced composites. Jesus surely didn't say these things only once! Many and varying performances of similar material may lead to similar but different texts. Which saying is the "original," Matthew's or Luke's? We don't know which one occurred first, and it probably doesn't matter. Because the audience and situation are different each time, each one is "original," and yet each performance is related because it is the same Jesus who says them and because the sayings and point are so similar. If they reflect

two different audiences and two different situations, they are both originals.¹³

Scene 7: A small group is gathered at the foot of one of the crosses at the crest of the hill outside Jerusalem. There is a sign over the cross that none of them can read. They know it is written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. They ask one of the Roman guards what the sign says. He says, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”

Who is the performer in the scene? Is it Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, who ordered these words be written? Is it the scribe who engraved the text of the sign? Is it the centurion who read it? Or, are they all performers in different ways for different audiences? The audience is more than this small group, but everyone who passes by—and especially those who might aspire to have the title “King of the Jews.” It functions as a warning, a threat, to those people! But to Christ-followers after the resurrection, the text of the sign continues to be performed by readers of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John’s Gospel.¹⁴ For these audiences, the sign is less threat than irony: the performance of the Gospels leads them to conclude that the sign tells the truth. Jesus is the promised King.

Scene 8: A group of women have gathered in the home of Mary from Magdala. They have heard she and a few other women were the first ones at the tomb of Jesus, and that Mary saw messengers who must have been from heaven. They told her that Jesus was alive! As she has done for weeks, she insists on telling the story from the beginning, to build up to the dramatic experience she had at the tomb and encourage her audience to tell the story to others. “This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you. . . .’”

13. On the multiple performances that led to what we now call the “Sermon on the Mount” and the “Sermon on the Plain,” see the suggestion first by George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 68.

14. Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19–20. Note four slightly different performances of the inscription. Kelly R. Iverson notes that Mark as storyteller juxtaposes mockery and confession in a similar way in the centurion’s confession that Jesus is the “Son of God.” Iverson, “A Centurion’s ‘Confession’: A Performance-Critical Analysis of Mark 15:39,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 2 (2011): 329–50.

Mary Magdalene, along with other women who followed Jesus, are uniquely privileged to be the witnesses of the empty tomb and the angelic messengers who explain that Jesus is alive (see, for example, Mark 16:1–8). The only way we could know these things today is because they told the story! In other words, they performed the story for others. Most likely, they didn't perform it once but many times as people wanted to hear what they saw—and what it means. As people asked Mary what Jesus' resurrection means, it would be natural for her to tell the story from the beginning. She has no text but her memory. Through her memory of her experiences and hearing others tell stories about Jesus, she could expand or contract the length of the story based on the time available and the audience's responses. By telling the story many times, she sharpens her language to be the most economical for the greatest impact on her audience. Although long before Mark wrote his version, Mary's telling may have been similar to Mark's Gospel. Mark, the shortest of the Gospels, can be told in about seventy-five minutes and contains many common storytelling features. Also, the earliest versions of Mark end with the humble confession that the women said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. As Mary ends the story, she demonstrates that she has overcome her fear. How that must have encouraged her audience to overcome their fear to tell the story to others!¹⁵

Scene 9: *“Where do the Judeans go to pray?” “Down by the river,” says everyone in the Roman colony of Philippi. On the Sabbath, Paul and his companions find a few women, mostly from out of town, who gather to pray and to hear what Torah can be recited from memory, and perhaps to sing a psalm. Always hospitable, the group gives Paul an opportunity to speak. He stands and begins to gesture, saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and Sarah, the Messiah promised to David’s house, the one whom God raised from the dead, the one who sets them free from sins. One woman,*

15. See Antoinette Clark Wire's argument that Mark's Gospel may have been told by Mary and the other women in *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 183–86. See also Joanna Dewey, “The Survival of Mark's Gospel: A Good Story?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 495–507.

*Lydia, a merchant from the city of Thyatira across the Aegean Sea in Asia Minor, invites Paul to tell about Jesus to her family. She and her household are baptized and invite Paul and his company to stay in her home while they are in Philippi.*¹⁶

In Acts 16:11–15, Luke portrays Paul as performing the story of Jesus and its significance for a group of Jewish women (and perhaps Gentiles who are interested in Judaism). There is no building—only a familiar meeting place on the bank of a river, perhaps where there is ample shade as well as water and quiet. Luke does not tell us the words he used in Philippi, but it is unlikely he used a manuscript for his speech. Paul spoke before the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia without any script (Acts 13:13–52), but Luke seems to show that speech to be a model of the kind of speeches Paul gave. In front of a Jewish audience, Paul usually tells the story of Jesus by telling the story of Israel. He begins with the exodus from slavery in Egypt, while emphasizing their identity as descendants of Abraham and Sarah. He has no written text, only his memories of the stories of God’s people that we now know in the Hebrew Bible. How does the audience respond? One listener, Lydia, is persuaded to become a Christ-follower and her whole household is baptized. Performance leads to changed identity!

Scene 10: While Paul was in Achaia, he remembered warmly his time with believers to the north in the city of Thessaloniki—about 160 kilometers (about a hundred miles) west of Philippi. He heard through the gossip network that they had a number of anxieties and questions. He wants to visit them, but feels compelled to stay in Achaia. He sent Timothy to encourage and teach them, but still there are questions and concerns. So, the next best thing to being there is to send a letter. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy talk through the contents of the letter. They want it to be read to the whole Christian community. How will each person hear it? After discussion, Silvanus makes a draft of the letter by using a wooden stylus to make impressions in a wax tablet. He reads back what has been dictated and they make changes in the wax. When they are satisfied with

16. I am assuming that Luke understands Paul’s message in this “place of prayer” to follow the pattern established in Acts 13:13–52. On the “Law and Prophets” perhaps referring to the Psalms as “prophetic,” see Barr, *Writing on the Tablet*, 265–66.

*how it sounds, Silvanus copies the letter from the wax using ink on a piece of papyrus.*¹⁷

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy are a performance trio shaping a text that is intended to be read aloud to a group. Silvanus, as the scribe in this scene, is the first audience who takes the discussion and distills the phrases and ideas into successive drafts until the group agrees with the wording and tone of the letter we now call “First Thessalonians.” Is each draft of the letter a separate performance? Another person will be the performer who appears before the congregation in Thessaloniki to read the letter aloud and most likely answer questions from the congregation to clarify its meaning.¹⁸

Scene 11: Everybody needs to eat, and we feel like we belong when we eat with others. The Greeks had the tradition of telling stories or sharing a poem or a speech after the meal when the food was digesting and the wine was still flowing. Jews and later Christians didn't like the prayers and sips of wine dedicated to Dionysius and Zeus, so they had their own stories, poems, and speeches and their own prayers to offer. As Justin explains Christianity to non-Christians, he says that Christians gather once a week on Sunday and had their readings and prayers first before the meal:

*The recollections of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us; he urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray. On the conclusion of our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people give assent by saying, “Amen.”*¹⁹

17. I arbitrarily chose Silvanus as the scribe, but it could be an unnamed amanuensis (“one who takes dictation”). On reading the letter before the community, see 1 Thess 5:27.

18. On the composition of letters, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006). On the reading and explanation of the letter, see Margaret M. Mitchell, “New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Timothy and Titus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 641–62. On the performance of Paul’s letters, see Lee A. Johnson, “Paul’s Epistolary Presence in Corinth: A New Look at Robert W. Funk’s Apostolic Parousia,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (July 2006): 481–501; Pieter J. J. Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012); and Bernhard Oestreich, *Performanzkritik der Paulusbriefe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

19. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66–67.

After everyone had received the bread and wine mixed with water, some of the leaders took bread and wine to those who were absent.

As with some of the others we've described, this scene from Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (c. 150 CE) is a performance within a performance. Justin performs what Christians perform when they gather. In Justin's performance, the point is to show nonbelievers that Christian practice is not strange, but comparable with Greek meals where food and traditional readings bond people together in common identity.

The embedded performance echoes other scenes we have discussed: the reading of memories before a group with interpretation for the present audience. The sharing of food after the time of readings and prayers may recall the serving of food after Ezra read the Law. This combination of food with performance is a common theme—and a potent one that welds people together in common identity and purpose. When the reader shares the memories of the apostles and prophets, it is not simply information. The performance and its interpretation by the “president of the assembly” is expected to transform the audience's behavior.

Scene 12: It is a Wednesday night in January in Arizona, and I stand on a stage in front of about 250 mostly comfortable middle- to upper-class people, who have gathered at their church to hear me explain what the book of Revelation means. I have just finished saying that we can't begin to understand the book of Revelation until we've had an experience of the book of Revelation. I have asked them to imagine they are representatives from seven congregations who have gathered to hear a messenger share the visions given to a prophet named John. I stand for a moment silently, with a scroll rolled up in my hand. I hold the scroll high over my head and say, “This is a revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his slaves what must happen soon. . . .”

This scene is not imagined, but a brief description of my performance of the book of Revelation in January 2014. The “text” is my translation of the book of Revelation that I memorized as well as the scroll that I use as a prop (which really is a scroll of the Greek text of Revelation). In chapter 4 of this book, I will be discussing this

performance and others that illuminate the process and payoff of biblical performance criticism.

Initial Reflections

The twelve scenes described above portray different kinds of performers, audiences, interactions, texts, and situations. These scenes are brief and incomplete, but evocative of the issues this book addresses. Here are some summary comments to consider with your own reflections.

In some scenes, the performer and audience are obvious. The audience has chosen to give attention to the performer and, in many cases, power. The power is important to note: when an audience allows themselves to be transformed by the performance, they yield power to the performer. In some cases, such as the scene with the father and son, the distinction between performer and audience is more fluid, with roles reversing or with give and take, which suggests power is shared more flexibly. But in other cases, the performer is performing for a scribe, such as a letter writer or engraver, who prepares a text for a different audience in a different time, place, and situation. The written text becomes somewhat independent of the initial performer because when it is performed again something will be different, the performer, the audience, and/or the situation. Everything may be changed by these differences, even the meaning and impact of the text! But the written text carries with it the initial act of power that caused its creation. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians carries his claim to authority. The inscription over Jesus' head reminds inescapably every further performer of Pilate's (and Rome's) power. The scroll I hold up claims authority as Jesus' revelation through John.

The bodies of the performer and audience are important in almost every scene: the posture of father and son as they recall the commandments. The father's nod of acceptance. The singers' and musicians' posture as they perform. Isaiah's naked body. Ezra's standing to read. The audience standing when they see the scroll, bowing to pray, and weeping. The food shared, some hunger satisfied.

Paul's gestures as he speaks. The body language of the audience. *Each performance is an embodied experience.*

Every performance *expects* some kind of response by the audience and responses happen even during the performance. The father expects his son to respond with the Ten Commandments, and his son interrupts the lesson with a question. Isaiah expects his nakedness and his explanation to shake a complacent, overconfident ruling class to abandon their alliance with Egypt and Ethiopia. Ezra and other leaders expect to pause the reading, explain it, and take questions. After reading the recollections of the apostles, the president expects Christians to imitate their virtues. In some cases, the audience is expected to become performers for a new audience: Heman's family and singers are first taught as audience but become performers. Mary Magdalene performs the story of Jesus for others and then expects them to become performers.

What is the "text"? When Ezra reads the Law, Jesus reads Isaiah, or the lector reads the recollections of the apostles, there is a written text to be referenced by the reader and seen by the audience. But for many performances, there is no written text present, only the memory of the performer. The focus on memory is clear even when the text is present, for example, "the recollections of the apostles." Even without a physical text, some performances will be similar to other performances in every respect, such as the father's response to his son may resemble the responses of other fathers. Other performances may rearrange material, such as Jesus reordering and tweaking his sayings and stories for different audiences. The text of these performance events would not be written until years later, and perhaps in very different circumstances. Our notions of "text" are not as fixed as we think, but are always dependent on memory and the performances of memory in specific situations.

The situation of a specific performance seems to determine the impact of a performance. A recitation of the Ten Commandments can take on one meaning in a time of peace and another in a time of conflict. Isaiah's words about the Spirit of the Lord can mean the joy

of a prophet announcing release from exile or a claim that Jesus is the long-promised King. The inscription, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” can mean a threat to those with royal aspiration or an ironic truth that Jesus really is King. The particular words performed are insufficient to decide what they mean for a specific audience. More information about the situation is needed to make sense of them.

The Plan of This Book

The focus of this book is insights from performance criticism, but we also need to present the why, what, and how of biblical performance criticism (chapter 2). Performance criticism offers keen insights into the Bible. It helps explain what is in the Bible and how the Bible is used. Chapters 3 and 4 are concrete examples of how it works. In chapter 3, we examine the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk and see how his prophecies make more sense if we view them as performances. Chapter 4 shares what I have learned about the book of Revelation by performing it with various audiences. Chapter 5 describes ten insights that I have learned from practicing performance criticism. In chapter 6, we will describe the challenges and considerations facing this young way of understanding the Bible.