

Drama and Performance: An Embodied Approach to Interpreting OT Narratives¹

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Introduction

This article will argue that the stories collected in the Bible are ancient dramas, the scripts of ancient performances. The implications of this reconsideration will begin with a re-evaluation of the narratives from the perspective of form criticism, but will point beyond form criticism² to the emergence of a new methodology called biblical performance criticism. Biblical performance criticism constitutes a paradigm shift from a text-orientation to a performance-orientation.

Evidence for the Narratives as Dramas

The clearest structural evidence for drama as the genre of the stories collected in the Bible is the consistent presence of dramatic structure guiding each story from establishing the setting, to introducing the central conflict, through its development to its

¹This article is adapted from the second chapter of my PhD dissertation. I am in the process of seeking publication for my dissertation, and would request that you not share this article without my written consent. If you desire to use it in a course, please contact me at travis@westernsem.edu. If you reference it in your own publication, please provide the proper citation.

²James Muilenburg famously inaugurated rhetorical criticism as a distinct approach to Old Testament research "with eminent lineage" (69) in form criticism in his 1968 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature conference titled "Form Criticism and Beyond." Muilenburg, "Form Criticism," 1-18. Muilenburg identified certain weaknesses and excesses of form criticism as it was being practiced, and suggested greater emphasis needed to be given to the received text *as a text* ("What I am interested in, above all, is in understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, in exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit" (57)). He offered rhetorical criticism as a way of moving "beyond" the limitations and exclusive application of form criticism. I am making a suggestion of a similar sort. Form criticism provides essential tools in the task of biblical interpretation through the identification of genre. But it has not adequately taken into account the pervasive influence of Israel's orality on the texts collected into the Bible today. Therefore, it is necessary to move "beyond" form criticism, but not to abandon it. Rhetorical criticism—and its close relative narrative criticism—also have failed to adequately account for the historical context that produced the biblical stories. Subsequently, form criticism, rhetorical, and narrative criticism have developed purely textual/literary methodological approaches to interpreting the stories. I am suggesting the field of biblical studies take the next logical step "beyond" form *and* rhetorical criticism to biblical performance criticism.

eventual resolution, and a concluding dénouement. The plot, which follows this fundamental story arc, progresses through scenes. Scene shifts are indicated by a change of location, the introduction of a new character, or a shift in the temporal flow³—or, often, a combination of these. Each scene progresses primarily through dialogue between two or three characters.⁴ Biblical dialogue is not quoted speech, similar to what would be found in a novel or history-writing. In dramatic dialogue characters speak for themselves and to each other, in the present tense.⁵ The story is told by a Narrator who introduces the dialogue, establishes the setting(s) in which the dialogue and action take place, introduces and describes the characters—in short, the Narrator tells the story—using third person verb forms, which suggests that the Narrator speaks directly to the gathered audience,⁶ and makes reference to the action unfolding on the stage as s/he speaks. The resolution of the conflict often returns to the opening theme so that the drama ends where it began, but in light of the transformation the conflict made possible.

An example will illustrate the presence of this structure. Take the story of Elisha and the unnamed widow from 2 Kings 4.1–7. Here is the text of this drama, arranged to accentuate its dramatic structure and scenic development. Narration is in roman type and dialogue is in italics.

CONFLICT

Scene 1

¹A woman, the wife of a member of the sons of the prophets, cried out to Elisha:

³The shift in temporal flow is often accompanied by a shift in location, and is generally accomplished in one of two ways. Either it is indicated through the use of וַיְהִי (*vayyehi*, "and it happened," cf. 2 Kgs 5:8 as the scene shifts from the palace in Samaria to Elisha's house, וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע אֵלִישָׁע, "And it happened / when (he) heard / Elisha" or, more smoothly, "And when Elisha heard"), or the reversal of the typical narrative word order of verb–subject to subject–verb (cf. Jonah 1:4, after Jonah sets sail toward Tarshish, וַיִּהְיֶה ה' הַיָּם, "And the Lord / hurled").

⁴Boogaart, "Arduous Journey," 3–4.

⁵This practice has parallels in other ancient contexts. For example, Kevin Robb has shown how Heraclitus, working in the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C.E. in Ephesus, a "protoliterate society," used "the present tense in describing the activities of long-dead figures: Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus." Robb, "The Linguistic Art of Heraclitus," 157.

⁶For more on the role of the Narrator in dramatic performance, see Chapter 3.

Your servant, my husband, is dead. And you know that your servant was one who feared the Lord. And the debt collector has come to take away my two children to be his slaves.

DEVELOPMENT

²Elisha said to her:

What can I do for you? Tell me, what have you in the house?

She said:

Your servant has nothing in the whole house, except a single jar of oil.

³He said:

Go. Borrow vessels from the streets, from all your neighbors. Empty vessels.

Not just a few!

⁴Enter your house and close the door behind you and behind your children. Pour into each and every vessel. When each is full, set it aside.

CLIMAX

Scene 2

⁵She left Elisha. And she closed the door behind her and behind her children. They were bringing the vessels to her, and she was pouring. ⁶When the vessels had all been filled, she said to her son:

Bring me another vessel!

He said:

There are no other vessels!

The oil stopped immediately.

RESOLUTION

Scene 3

⁷The woman went and told the man of God. He said:

Go. Sell the oil. Pay off your debt. You and your children will live on what is left over.

Note the extensive use of dialogue and how it carries the burden of developing and resolving the conflict. Note, too, how the characters speak in the present tense—using present-tense verbs, including imperatives and participles. Each new location indicates a shift in scene. Each scene involves dialogue between two or three characters.

This short drama has only three scenes, which take place in three locations: the first and last are undisclosed locations where the woman engages the prophet, and scene two takes place within the woman's house (after she has collected the vessels, ostensibly from her neighbors, which is unnarrated). The conflict is introduced at the very beginning of the drama (the death of her husband and the threat of losing her children, v. 1) and is developed through dialogue and action. The resolution of the conflict returns to the opening theme by way of a dramatic *inclusio* (death to life; crushing debts to enough to live on). Variations on this structure can be traced in every drama in the Hebrew Bible, from dramas in Genesis and Judges to the extended dramas of Ruth and Jonah. In general, the shorter the drama the simpler the structure. Longer dramas could have multiple scenes. More than one climax is also possible as interweaving storylines develop and are resolved as the drama moves from conflict to resolution.⁷

A Paradigm Shift in Biblical Studies

The identification of the narratives as "drama" is complicated by a pervasive textual/literary bias in biblical scholarship, both with respect to methodology and the genre question. For example, with respect to methodological assumptions, much of the structural evidence offered above to support the designation of "drama" has been used by literary critics over the last few decades to demonstrate the singular *literary* achievement of the Israelites. Meir Sternberg has highlighted the critical role of the Narrator in biblical storytelling,⁸ although not from a perspective that takes seriously the oral-performance context in which the art was refined.⁹ Robert Chisholm identified the ubiquity of dramatic structure that develops through scenes that shift based on location and

⁷Dramatic structure, narration, dialogue, and several other features of Israelite drama will be discussed in much greater detail in the following chapter.

⁸Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. Sternberg discusses the narrator from many different angles throughout this tome. See index for extensive reference.

⁹I will return to this theme and comment on it directly in Chapter 3.

narration,¹⁰ and the role of conflict or tension was famously used by Erich Auerbach to illustrate the power of Israel's *literary* achievement (somewhat ironically through comparison to the *dramatic* achievement of Homer's *Odyssey*).¹¹

On the one hand, it is not surprising this has occurred. The Bible *is* a text, after all, and all of its component parts are likewise *texts*. As such, they can be productively studied *as texts*. Narrative critics such as Alter, Sternberg, Dana Fewell and David Gunn; along with rhetorical critics such as Phyllis Tribble have demonstrated this time and again with deeply satisfying results. But, on the other hand, they are *more* than texts. They are the scripts of ancient performances.

The difference between the two conclusions about genre (literary or dramatic) is largely dependent upon the assumptions the scholar holds about the nature of the biblical material. As Chapter 1 argued, the textualized versions of the biblical dramas existed for generations, even centuries, alongside the oral performances. *And the written versions existed primarily as a way of sustaining and supporting oral performances of the tradition*. In other words, the oral performances were primary and the written texts were secondary. The written texts grew out of and are reflections of oral performances.

This final point is critical, and clarifies some of the confusion inherent in the intersection of orality, textuality, drama, and genre. Walter Ong states the issue straightforwardly when he laments that we tend to derive our concept of oral performance from what we know of literature, "despite the fact that in actuality it is literature which grows out of oral performance."¹² Michael Goldman concurs. In his insightful book *On Drama*, Goldman argues that a number of the complications and confusions within genre research would be clarified by the simple recognition that drama gave birth to literature.

¹⁰Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books*, 46.

¹¹Auerbach, *Mimesis*.

¹²Ong, *Presence of the Word*, 21.

Many problems not only in dramatic but literary theory would take on a sharply new perspective if, just to clear the air, let us say, we were to reverse the process and think instead of drama as the most general case of literature, with poetry, the novel, and so forth as specializations. We might do well in fact to imagine drama as the originary literary or artistic form, if only to offset the myth, nowadays unacknowledged because epistemologically incorrect, but nevertheless still dominant, of the literary origins of drama (from choral lyric, narrative, Solonic speeches in the agora, or whatever). Actually, the old habit of thinking about drama as a genre of 'literature,' a habit seemingly as old as criticism itself, has worked to obscure some important connections between drama and life—especially with some features of life we're likely today to regard as intensely difficult, issues that bear on self and meaning, on persons and texts, on identity and community.¹³

When Goldman suggests drama as "the originary literary or artistic form," one should not conclude he is suggesting that drama is a textual reality. Quite the opposite. He is attempting to shift the conversation away from a genre-as-literature orientation to a medium- or performance-orientation. This shift is inherent in the generic identification "drama." Another extended quote from Goldman will clarify his argument. This quote follows a brief overview of the contradictions and complications embedded in the genre-as-literature conversation, which do not discuss drama or the paradigm shift it introduces into the conversation.

Still, most of these discussions, certainly the most influential, are deficient in a signal respect. They fail to engage drama fully as an experience, an ongoing moment-to-moment process for audiences or readers. They have in common a tendency to treat genre as a reflective category, a way of classifying and systematizing dramatic texts and performances after the fact. Everything changes, however, if we stop to think of genre as not entirely unlike rhyme, say, or ambiguity, as a feature, that is, whose primary interest for readers or audiences is as something that *happens* to us in a poem or play, *as it happens*.¹⁴

Goldman, like Fowler, is trying to shift the conversation about genre away from a traditional classificatory approach. But Goldman's experience in the theatre compels him to take a step beyond Fowler, who still considers the point of genre as essentially descrip-

¹³Goldman, *On Drama*, 6–7.

¹⁴Goldman, *On Drama*, 3; emphasis original.

tive, just in a more nuanced way than classificatory approaches have described them. Goldman expands the conversation to include the dynamic *encounter* that is inherent in dramatic performance as an essential part of what constitutes a genre. A genre is not just a carrier of meaning and communication, as Fowler argued, it is something that *happens*, and it happens *in the moment*.

Shimon Levy is an Israeli theatre critic and theatre professor who has been exploring biblical dramas through the lens of theatrical performance for some time. Like Goldman, he was baffled by the genre conversation as it had been conducted, particularly in biblical studies, that focused on the narrative portion of the Hebrew Bible. But, unlike Goldman, who tried to change the conversation by expanding it to include drama, Levy chose to abandon the question of genre altogether:

Among the literary approaches to the Old Testament, Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* is a major breakthrough in the field, as well as Robert Alter's insightful *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and Uriel Simon's *Reading Prophetic Narratives*. However, whereas the term 'dramatic' is used in most literary-oriented works mainly to indicate particular structural elements, as well as the prevalence of conflict, dialogue, modes of characterization, and other drama-as-genre elements, this book shifts the focus from a literary genre-oriented discussion to a medium-oriented one.¹⁵

Terry Giles and William Doan, who have written extensively on the impact of Israel's orality and performance traditions on the works now collected in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁶ came to a similar conclusion as Levy: "'drama' is best understood as an event and not a particular literary form or text."¹⁷

Two things seem to be clear at this point. First, despite the insightful and constructive research of a number of scholars, Rolf Knierim's conclusion in 1973 still appears to resonate, over forty years later: "we are [still] no longer so clear as to what

¹⁵Levy, *Bible As Theatre*, 5.

¹⁶In order of publication: Giles and Doan, *Prophets, Performance, and Power*; Giles and Doan, "Performance Criticism," 273–286; Giles and Doan, *Twice Used Songs*; Giles and Doan, *Story of Naomi*.

¹⁷Giles and Doan, *Twice Used Songs*, 86.

exactly a genre is."¹⁸ This is particularly true with respect to drama, which has a textual element (the script) and can be fruitfully analyzed as literature, but is fundamentally an event, an experience, something that *happens* between audience and actors on a stage. Secondly, whether genre is conceived of as a singularly literary category, or more akin to "ambiguity" or "rhyme," as Goldman offered, the narratives in the Hebrew Bible exhibit a distinctly dramatic character and, given the culture out of which they arose it would be profitable to explore ways of interpreting them that resonate with this inherent dramatic nature. The implications of this are implied in David Rhoads' insightful application of a familiar axiom: "[T]he medium is part of the message, if not the message itself. Studying these texts in an exclusively written medium has shaped, limited and perhaps even distorted our understanding of them . . . Taking oral performance into account may enable us to be more precise in our historical re-constructions and more faithful in our interpretations."¹⁹ Biblical performance criticism is an emerging methodology in biblical studies which offers a way to do precisely that.

Resistance to the Narratives as Drama

Beyond the textual bias that has characterized most academic approaches to the Bible, there may be yet another reason why biblical scholars have been slow to see the importance of performance in Israel. Namely, an assumption regarding Israel's reticence to represent God in a physical form on stage in light of the commandment against making a graven image of God. In fact, theatre historians such as Gordon C. Bennett and modern Israeli theatre professors such as Shimon Levy argue against a dramatic tradition in ancient Israel precisely on this assumption: the Israelites would have never dared represent an embodiment of God. Bennett argues the point this way:

¹⁸Knierim, "Form Criticism Reconsidered," 436.

¹⁹Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part I" 126.

Unlike the Egyptians and Greeks and some early Eastern civilizations, the Hebrews made little use of drama. Indeed, they dabbled very little in art since they were forbidden by Exodus 20:4 to make "any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."²⁰

Bennett's assertion that the Hebrews largely rejected "art" because of the second commandment is demonstrably false. Shortly after the Ten Commandments are delivered God carries on for several chapters providing detailed and imaginative descriptions of the craftsmanship God desired for the Tabernacle.²¹ Not only so, but God called two artists *by name* (Bezalel and Oholiab²²) and filled Bezalel, the leader, with the Spirit of God (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, *ruach 'elohim*²³) in order to empower him to fulfill God's calling on him to fill the Tabernacle with art. Indeed, the Tabernacle itself—and the Temple after it—was a work of art. Bezalel and Oholiab were not the only artists in Israel; they were set in leadership over many craftsmen. Indeed, Israel had a rich artistic tradition.

Bennett's earlier point concerning the Hebrew's avoidance of drama is made more explicitly and compellingly by Shimon Levy, with reference to the same verse in Exodus. Levy argues "the very notion of presenting the Almighty in a corporeal fashion is strongly opposed to the second commandment."²⁴ A closer look at the biblical evidence, however, suggests otherwise. The second commandment has to do with fashioning idols and preventing idolatry, the worship of human-made images. It does not prohibit a human—who is described in Genesis 1 as a *representative* of God (God's *image*) on earth—from standing in God's stead to represent God's presence, to manifest God's actions, or to speak God's words to a gathered congregation. Scripture is full of humans speaking God's words to the people of God (this was the vocation of the

²⁰Bennett, *Acting Out Faith*, 15; quoted in Boogaart, "Drama and the Sacred," 39.

²¹Cf. Exod 25–40.

²²Exod 31:2, 6.

²³Exod 31:3.

²⁴Levy, *Bible as Theatre*, 6.

prophet²⁵), and of humans both mediating God's presence to the gathered people and bringing their concerns before God (this was the vocation of the priest²⁶). Prophets and priests used their bodies and voices not only to communicate God's words and intentions to the people of Israel, but to mediate God's physical presence in their midst as well.

That the stories were told before live audiences is a relative certainty. And whether the stories were performed by a single storyteller or by a cast of actors, both types of performance require the audience to "see" the stage and "see" the action as the actors incarnate it on the stage. There is no question that God is a character in many dramas in Scripture. God is the subject of verbs that describe concrete actions, such as "seeing,"²⁷ "speaking,"²⁸ "hearing,"²⁹ and even actions like "hurling,"³⁰ God speaks for Godself, and when God speaks (as in Genesis 22:2), God's words create the framework in which the entire drama is set.³¹

²⁵Cf. "[P]rophecy as a communication between God and humanity dates back to the very beginning of human history." *NIDOTTE*, s.v. "Prophecy."

²⁶"Perhaps the central concept of priesthood is mediation between the sphere of the divine and the ordinary world. A priest through his ritual actions and his words facilitates communication across the boundary separating the holy from the profane. *The priests represented God to the people* in the splendor of their clothing, in their behavior, and in oracles and instruction, while in sacrifice and intercession they represented the people to God." *NIDOTTE*, s.v. "קָהֵן."

²⁷Cf. Exod 2:25.

²⁸Cf. 1 Kgs 3:5.

²⁹Cf. Gen 21:17.

³⁰Cf. Jonah 1:4.

³¹Another classic example of this is the book of Jonah. God is even more active and physically located in Jonah. The story of Jonah also begins with God's speech, and God's words create the framework by which Jonah's actions will be measured ("Get up! Go! Cry out!"). But God is also physically located in (or immediately above) Nineveh, which is explicitly referenced a number of times by different characters, and is the backdrop for the scandal of God's mercy demonstrated in the drama. God locates himself in Nineveh to Jonah: "their [Nineveh's] evil *has come up before my face*" (Jonah 1:2); the Narrator also implies this several times by describing Jonah's actions in traveling *toward* Tarshish as moving "away from the face of YHVH" (Jonah 1:3, 10), thus establishing a horizontal axis between Nineveh and Tarshish, with God in Nineveh and Jonah moving toward Tarshish. Establishing this horizontal axis is a crucial backdrop for one of the drama's primary theological affirmations: God is in Nineveh because God is *everywhere*; you cannot flee "away from the face of the Lord," no matter how hard you try or how far you go, you will always be running *toward* the face of YHVH (the psalmist's metaphors find concrete expression in Jonah's tale: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast" (Ps 139:7–10)).

It is conceivable that the speech, actions, and presence of the God-character in the dramas was somehow achieved without a specific actor—or actors—performing them visibly and audibly on stage. I do not find this argument compelling, however, given the way the stories themselves are told, and the unique way that God is presented *as a character* in many of the dramas. Israel maintained a prohibition against graven images *and* told their ancestral stories in the way they did. They did not see the two as incompatible, nor should we. In other words, the force of the biblical material itself ought to drive our conclusions about it. The scripts themselves raise the question and point toward the conclusion that representing God in some way³² is not only acceptable but beneficial. This suggests that the stories can be studied to understand more deeply how the people of Israel rendered God. What was permissible? What crossed the line into idolatry? Biblical performance criticism opens up this very important conversation and offers new insights and directions for future consideration.³³

³²There are a number of different ways this could be explored, each of which would offer a different insight into Israel's understanding of God. Certainly one option is simply to have a single actor represent God in the same way another actor represents Abraham, and another Isaac. Another possibility would be to have a male and a female actor both portray God, given that Gen 1:27 male and female together as constituting God's image. The Narrator could also adopt the role of God, as the Narrator, by virtue of his/her omniscience and unique mediating role, is a more logical choice for that role than any other character within the drama. A final example is drawn from an especially powerful performance of God in the Binding of Isaac that a group of musically-inclined students developed a few years ago. Given ancient societies' connection with music (and the many references to it throughout the Hebrew Bible), it is entirely possible these performances were accompanied by singing, instrumentation, or some kind of drumming. These students chose to utter God's lines in a three-part chant, composed of the actor representing God, along with the Angel and the Narrator. For God's line in Gen 22:2 Abraham slept center stage. The three actors gathered in a semi-circle behind him, facing the audience. God began the line alone, slowly chanting the words. After a few words the Angel and Narrator joined in three-part harmony. When they arrived at the critical word in the line, וְהֵעֲלֵהוּ (*veha'aleihu*, "and you will offer him up"), they broke the harmony and introduced dissonance, which persisted throughout the remainder of the line, creating a very uncomfortable ethos, which not only played out visually as they surrounded Abraham, but aurally as the dissonant tones manifested the theologically dissonant command. It is impossible to know how God as a character in the dramas was represented; perhaps various traditions or communities had different ways of rendering God, and perhaps some were more inclined to do so than others. Regardless of the specific way it was done, it seems clear to me that God was presented in *some* way, and biblical performance criticism offers the scholar tools to explore this theological and theatrical dynamic further.

³³The foregoing discussion should not be interpreted as a denial or rejection of the fact that a tradition developed within Judaism against physical representations of God that resulted in the relative absence of a continuous theatrical tradition. But it is to say that appeals to Exod 20:4 are not satisfying as justification for a rejection of a dramatic performance tradition in ancient Israel.

Further resistance is made against a dramatic tradition in pre-exilic Israel on the basis of a two-fold lack of concrete archeological and artifactual evidence, namely, the absence of theaters in ancient Israel, and the lack of a continuous performance tradition sustained throughout the intertestamental period as Judaism emerged into the first century CE and beyond—especially given the negative perspective on pagan theatrical performances by the rabbis.³⁴ In his 2005 dissertation on the Hellenistic Jewish author Ezekiel the Tragedian's first century BCE play *L'Exagoge*, Pierluigi Lanfranchi remarks that this work is an exceptional instance of Jewish theatre in the ancient world; the only one of its kind from that era. *L'Exagoge* is a theatrical retelling of the Exodus story. But apparently it did not catch on, for "historians set the birth of a true Jewish theater in the XVII century when the Ashkenazi communities of northern Italy developed an original form of spectacle based on the medieval tradition of the Purim Spiel."³⁵ However, the absence of theaters in Israel is *not* evidence against a rich dramatic tradition in pre-exilic Palestine. Perhaps the discovery of ancient theaters in Palestine would have made my argument easier to make, but we must not equate the absence of Greek-style theatrical stages in Israel to a lack of a performance tradition. Indeed, the *absence* of such is precisely what we would expect to find (or, rather, *not* find). Israel's dramatic tradition did not serve the purposes of secular entertainment but were grounded in Israel's ritual and worshiping life. The performance arenas of the biblical dramas would not have been divorced from their places of worship and community gatherings, for the performances served the explicit purpose of connecting the community to each other and ultimately to God through their ancestors.³⁶ Indeed, Peter Brook's famous opening line in *The Empty Space* was no doubt as true in ancient Israel as it is now: "I can take any empty space

³⁴Lanfranchi, *L'Exagoge*, 8.

³⁵Lanfranchi, *L'Exagoge*, 7.

³⁶See Chapter 1 for a fuller treatment of this.

and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged."³⁷ The "empty spaces" in Israel were likely the courtyard of the Tabernacle, or Temple, or wherever local communities gathered for formal and informal worship, to pass on tradition, living into the psalmist's words in Psalm 145:4: "One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts."³⁸

It is perhaps true that what is today known as the "true Jewish theater" began among Ashkenazi communities in northern Italy in the seventeenth century, but it is also likely that this theatrical tradition was not the first one to grow out of a Jewish (or, more accurately, their ancient Israelite foregears') context.

What is Meant by "Performance"?

I have used the term "performance" a number of times already. It is not easy to define. Over the last few decades the term has received extensive critical reflection across a vast array of disciplines—including the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts.³⁹ Some comments on this diversity and an attempt at a definition by way of etymology will lend some clarity to the present argument.

Richard Schechner demonstrates the complicated ways in which the word "performance" is used today through a list he titles the "Eight Kinds of Performance."⁴⁰ According to Schechner, "performances occur in eight sometimes separate, sometimes overlapping situations:

1. in everyday life—cooking, socializing, 'just living'
2. in the arts
3. in sports and other popular entertainments
4. in business

³⁷Brook, *Empty Space*, 9.

³⁸NRSV.

³⁹Giles and Doan, *Twice Used Songs*, 141.

⁴⁰Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 31.

5. in technology
6. in sex
7. in ritual—sacred and secular
8. in play."⁴¹

In light of this profound diversity, performance has been described as "an essentially contested concept."⁴² Marvin Carlson and other performance critics view this as a positive development. This is because the inherent lack of consensus serves a generative academic function, namely, to stimulate critical dialogue toward the end of attaining "a sharper articulation of all positions and therefore a fuller understanding of the conceptual richness of performance."⁴³ In the pages that follow I attempt to contribute to "a sharper articulation" of the concept of performance as it relates to ancient Israel.

Victor Turner, the trailblazing interdisciplinary cultural anthropologist, made an early contribution to the discussion around the definition of performance by drawing on the etymology of the word itself, which is helpful in that it narrows the scope of the word from its ubiquitous application across various disciplines to describe a particular process. The English word "performance" is borrowed from Old French, and is the composite of *par*, "thoroughly," and *fournir*, "to furnish." Turner explains that to "thoroughly furnish" does not suggest "the structuralist implication of manifesting form, but the processual sense of 'bringing to completion' or 'accomplishing.'"⁴⁴ If this etymological definition is situated in the context of a primarily oral culture like Israel in which the sundry textual tradition serves to sustain the community's memory, performance speaks of the process whereby the reality latent in both text and memory is manifested—"furnished," or "brought to completion"—before a gathered community through the bodies, movements, voices, and silences of performers.

⁴¹Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 31.

⁴²Carlson, *Performance*, 1.

⁴³Strine, Long, and Hopkins, "Research in Interpretation," 183; quoted in Carlson, *Performance*, 1.

⁴⁴Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 91.

This is precisely the context David Rhoads had in mind when he offered his own definition of performance as it relates to the biblical tradition. Although Rhoads was speaking particularly about the New Testament context, his description is equally as accurate for the Old Testament context. According to Rhoads, performance refers to "any oral telling/retelling of a brief or lengthy tradition—from saying to gospel—in a formal or informal context of a gathered community by trained or untrained performers—on the assumption that every telling was a lively recounting of that tradition."⁴⁵

This final claim—"that every telling was a lively recounting of that tradition"—is the most important addition to Turner's etymology because it describes *how* performance "thoroughly furnishes" a tradition or a story, whether it is drawn from text or memory. What Rhoads means by "a lively recounting" includes much more than merely words spoken to an audience. "It includes intonation, movements, gestures, pace, facial expressions, postures, the spatial relationships of the imagined characters, the temporal development of the story in progressive events displayed on stage, and much more."⁴⁶ In short, a "lively recounting" is a dramatic performance.

To say a performance "brings to completion" is to imply a state of incompleteness prior to performance. Max Harris states this fact straightforwardly: "Dramatic texts are incomplete works of art."⁴⁷ An analogy to music is suggested in the conclusions of both Turner and Harris. Consider, for example, the Brandenburg Concertos by J.S. Bach. It would not make sense to simply study the score and consider each note as it was written on each page. Certainly careful attention to the score is helpful and important, and provides the violinist with a fuller sense of the patterns, repetitions, and trajectory of the concerto, but the score was composed in order to be performed, and until it is

⁴⁵David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part I" 119.

⁴⁶Rhoads, "What Is Performance Criticism?" 89.

⁴⁷Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, 1.

performed it is, in a real sense, incomplete. The performance (the "lively recounting" of the score through the dynamic encounter between the musicians' bodies and skills, their instruments, the music they create, the space and its acoustics, and the gathered audience) brings the composition to its fullest expression—the expression for which it was written. Certainly some performances are better than others (compare the Philharmonic Orchestra to a local middle school symphony), but each performance actualizes the latent dynamism of the score and projects it into space and time, creating a shared experience that is dependent upon—and greater than the sum of—all the parts.

It is the same with the biblical dramas. They do not reach their fullest expression until they are embodied and voiced by a performer, or a group of performers, who present the drama to a gathered audience. Modern stage performance views the script of the play in the same way. "From the performative perspective, stage production is, in a sense, the final cause for the writing of plays, which are fully realized only in the circumstances for which they were originally intended: theatrical performance."⁴⁸ An important caveat to the comparisons I am making between biblical dramas and, either a Bach concerto or a Shakespearean play, is to note that both Bach and Shakespeare *wrote* a piece that was intended to be performed. In other words, the writing came first and the performance was the fulfillment of the script. The biblical dramas were first *told*, and then written as a way to support and sustain the community's memory. But the text did not replace the performance (at least not initially⁴⁹); the two existed together for a long time before the performance tradition faded. The analogies with Bach and Shake-

⁴⁸ Worthen, *Shakespeare*, 4.

⁴⁹ It is impossible to know precisely when this happened, but it would likely have coincided with an event that threatened the preservation of the tradition through memory, and that prevented the community to continue to gather in order to remember. The most likely explanation is that the performance tradition declined during the exile even as the desire to commit the tradition to writing increased.

speare are apt, but orality and the performance event takes an even more prominent role in the historical process with the Bible.

To conclude this section I offer the following definition of "performance," built on the definitions above, as well as a definition of "drama" and "theater," as I use them. "Performance" refers to the public event for which all of the preparations—script, memorization, blocking, rehearsal, gathering of the audience, etc.—are intended. Further, and building on Victor Turner's etymology, the event manifests a latent potentiality in the script—bringing it to completion—in a way that no other engagement with the text can adequately accomplish, and in a way that resonates with the original context and purpose of the script. "Drama" and "theatre" are very similar terms, and I will occasionally use them interchangeably. According to William Doan, professor of theatre at the Pennsylvania State University, "drama occurs when one or more human beings, isolated in time and space, present themselves in imagined acts to another or others."⁵⁰ And "theatre" is nearly identical to drama, except it refers to "the larger framework for acts of presentation" of which drama is a part.⁵¹

Dramatic Implications: Insights from Theatre and Performance Theorists

So far this chapter has engaged the issue of genre, what the text and the context suggests about the nature of the biblical narratives, and the elusive term "performance." If I am right, and the narratives are dramas, scripts of ancient plays, then a methodological paradigm shift is needed to approach the dramas in a way that is faithful to their basic character. This section will take a closer look at the performance event itself—the event that constitutes the shift from a textual-orientation to a medium- or performance-orientation—and will draw on performance theorists and other biblical performance

⁵⁰Giles and Doan, *Twice Used Songs*, 141.

⁵¹Giles and Doan, *Twice Used Songs*, 143.

critics in order to understand more fully what the paradigm shift involves. This section will also lend credibility to my argument by corroborating with and further developing the insights of cultural anthropologists, orality scholars, and biblical performance critics offered above and in Chapter 1.

What *happens* in a performance? Many things, in fact. Performances are complex and multi-layered events, with various implications for how we approach biblical dramas today. Performances complicate a linear view of time by exhibiting a "ghostliness" to past experiences or past events *in the present*. Performances are powerful encounters which can transport and even transform actor and audience alike. They consist of elevated actions, interactions, and speech occurring in spaces that are framed to communicate that something unusual is happening and normal definitions of reality do not apply. Finally, performances involve self-reflexivity, embodiment, process, and re-enactment.

"Ghostliness"

Marvin Carlson identified the "ghostly" character of performance as "the common coin of theatre everywhere in the world at every period."⁵² He defines this sense of "ghostliness" this way: "The retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the reexperience of emotions already experienced, these are and have always been central concerns of the theatre in all times and places."⁵³ Put another way, the ghostly character inherent in theatre, drama, and performance is captured in descriptions of performance that begin with the prefix "re." Elin Diamond explains that "the terminology of 're' in discussion of performance, as in *remember*, *reinscribe*, *reconfigure*, *reiterate*, *restore*" points to the way performance constitutes a "repetition within

⁵²Carlson, *Haunted Stage*, 3.

⁵³Carlson, *Haunted Stage*, 3.

the performative present, but 'figure,' 'script,' and 'iterate' assert the possibility of something that *exceeds* our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines new unsuspected subject positions."⁵⁴

All performances occur at the intersection of the past (the "re") and the present (the "enactment"). This is particularly true of performances that take history—understood as the stories that constitute a community's identity—as their subject matter. In *Performing History* Eddie Rokem suggests that "the repressed ghostly figures and events from that ('real') historical past can (re)appear on the stage in theatrical performances. The actors performing such historical figures are in fact the 'things' who are appearing again tonight in the performance. And when these ghosts are historical figures they are in a sense performing history."⁵⁵

The dynamic experience of time that Carlson, Diamond, and Rokem describe as characterizing the theater—which could be called "performance time"—resonates with the nonlinear notion of time common to oral cultures, discussed in Chapter 1. Tom Boogaart has considered how this understanding of time was expressed in Israel's dramatic tradition with respect to the ancient custom of honoring the ancestors. According to Boogaart, the lives of the ancestors

bore meaning, and the events of their lives were potentially sacramental. The performance of a narrative probed this deeper meaning in the lives of the ancestors and made it accessible to their descendants. In the moment of a narrative performance, the barriers of time and space were overcome, and the people were caught up in the drama—in the same way people today are caught up in the performance of a drama. The people of Israel heard again the words of their fathers and mothers, and they saw again their deeds. In this way, they honored their ancestors as a source of wisdom and guidance in the ways of the Lord.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Diamond, *Writing Performances*, 2; quoted in Carlson, *Haunted Stage*, 2–3.

⁵⁵Rokem, *Performing History*, 6.

⁵⁶Boogaart, "Arduous Journey," 4.

During oral performances of Israel's dramatic tradition, the traditions of the tradition "became" the ancestors of Israel who "appeared again here tonight."⁵⁷

Gregory Nagy describes an analogous experience in the traditions of Homeric performance with the term *mimesis*, or, re-enactment.⁵⁸ According to Nagy, the narration of Homer's works, as well as the speech of heroes and gods

are not at all representations: they are the real thing. . . . Further, and this is crucial for the argument at hand, when the rhapsode says "tell me, Muses!" (*Iliad* 2.484) or "tell me, Muse!" (*Odyssey* 1.1), this "I" is not a *representation* of Homer: it *is* Homer. My argument is that the rhapsode is re-enacting Homer by performing Homer; that he is Homer so long as the *mimesis* stays in effect, so long as the performance lasts.⁵⁹

My argument is essentially the same. In performance—particularly performances in ancient Israel—time and memory conspire to collapse the distance that normally divides the awareness of the past from the experience of the present. In performance the past and the present overlap. And the continual overlapping of past and present in performance maintains each generation's connection to the past and opens up new possibilities and new interpretations as they encounter unforeseen circumstances. This is an example in "real life" of what Bakhtin and Fowler described in genre theory, namely, Bakhtin's notion of "genre memory"⁶⁰ and Fowler's "metamorphosis."⁶¹

Similar to Nagy, Jeanette Mathews uses the term re-enactment to describe this "ghostly" dynamic that characterizes performances. According to Mathews, all performances are seen as being "based on pre-existing models, scripts or patterns."⁶² She also notes the interchange between tradition and innovation that occurs each time a past

⁵⁷A line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, quoted in Rokem, *Performing History*, 6.

⁵⁸Nagy, *Poetry as performance*, 83.

⁵⁹Nagy, *Poetry as performance*, 61.

⁶⁰Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, 106.

⁶¹Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 23.

⁶²Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 33.

performance is re-enacted in the present, which is always accompanied by the "knowledge that change will come about in the re-enactment."⁶³

Transportation and Transformation

The change that results from this overlapping of past and present is achieved, in part, by the power of performance to "transport" and "transform."⁶⁴ Each participant—actors and audiences alike—is *taken* somewhere in a performance, transported to another place, another time, something like another dimension where different possibilities or emotions or experiences become possible than what "normal" everyday living typically allows. Transportation is a common denominator among various types of cultural performance. In theatrical performance the actors experience transportation by temporarily "leaving" themselves in order to "be fully 'in' whatever they are performing."⁶⁵ The transportation actors experience in performance provides the context for Schechner's famous term "double negative." He defines it this way: "In theatre, actors onstage do more than pretend. The actors live a double negative. While performing, actors are not themselves, nor are they the characters. Theatrical role-playing takes place between 'not me . . . not not me.'⁶⁶ It is the actors' ability to be transported "into" their roles that enables the audience's transportation "out of" their world and "into" the world of the story unfolding through the performance. Transportation can serve purposes both secular and sacred; they can entertain and affect change.

Transformational experiences, according to Schechner, either mark or actually facilitate a shift of identity and are, therefore, much less common than transportation experiences. "Transformational" performances are something like modern rites of

⁶³Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 34.

⁶⁴Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 72.

⁶⁵Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 72.

⁶⁶Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 72. Cf. Carlson, *Performance*, 49.

passage—religious conversion, becoming a shaman or medium, for example.⁶⁷ Schechner suggests that people are generally transformed only once or twice in a lifetime—some never—but transportation experiences could happen much more often.

For the people of Israel it is likely these two experiences had considerably more overlap than Schechner allows with respect to modern theatrical performances. Israel did not have a theatrical tradition focused on entertainment, but on transformation. Israel's tradition, rather, was grounded in the worship and ritual life of the people. The intention was to facilitate a connection between the gathered people and their ancestors, to ground each successive generation in the traditions of Israel as a people, to continually transform the people (back) into the people of God, and to sustain the ancestors' memory and their way of life into the unknown future.

Framing

How does an audience member or actor know when a performance has begun or ended; how does one know when one is experiencing the dynamics of performance? Schechner notes that a performance is simply "whatever takes place between a marked beginning and a marked end."⁶⁸ This marking is called "framing." It is distinctive to the type of performance and also to the culture in which the performance takes place. In modern theatre the beginning is framed by a dimming of the lights and the curtain being opened. Similarly, the end is framed by the bows of the actors, the closing of the curtain, and the lights coming back on.⁶⁹ In between those two frames actor and audience agree to set aside the normal conventions of human interaction and together enter into performance time. A frame need not be a formal convention such as the opening and

⁶⁷Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 72.

⁶⁸Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 240.

⁶⁹Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 240.

closing of a curtain; it can happen in myriad informal ways, such as a group of people unexpectedly gathering around a street performer, or a child shouting "Mommy, look at me!" Framing is a way of establishing a boundary that defines the difference between typical interactions and the operations of performance. Framing constitutes part of the difference between people acting strangely in public, and performers transporting and possibly transforming themselves and an audience. Recognition of the frame is critical to appropriate interaction with and interpretation of the performance, and is, like the operations of genre, culturally constructed. Performances in Israel may have been framed by any number of elements, from the gathering of people into the performance space (whether the Temple or a local gathering place, like a city gate, perhaps) to a worship leader introducing or setting up the performance, to the communal singing of a psalm that made reference to the historical event(s) that would be returned to explicitly in a dramatic performance.⁷⁰

*Self-Reflexivity*⁷¹

Self-reflexivity involves the recognition that performance makes culture "conscious to both the performer and the viewer."⁷² It is related to Schechner's "double negative" in that it involves the awareness that the actors are not the characters they are portraying, but is larger, and includes the way performances impact culture by rendering the cultural exchange explicit and conscious to both actor and audience through the mutual acknowledgement and acceptance of "'pretence'—a pretence on the part of the performer that the interaction is somehow other than it actually is and an

⁷⁰E.g., Ps 135:8–9 with reference to the exodus, or Ps 136, which references God's actions throughout many events of Israel's sacred history.

⁷¹The next three elements are borrowed and expanded from a list of "five performance themes" in Jeanette Mathews' *Performing Habakkuk* that she identified to demonstrate elements of performance studies that are relevant for the scholarly dialogue between biblical studies and performance studies. Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 27–35.

⁷²Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 27.

awareness on the part of the observer that pretence is occurring."⁷³ Framing, discussed above, helps to communicate the presence of pretense. Some forms of performance are particularly self-reflexive. Among these are "theatrical devices that heighten the nature of a play such as addresses to the audience."⁷⁴ The biblical dramas draw heavily on this heightened element of self-reflexivity through the operations of third person narration in which the audience would be constantly addressed directly by the Narrator, drawing them not only into the story, but into the cultural exchange the performance is facilitating.

Embodiment

Text-oriented epistemologies are challenged by performance studies' emphasis on embodiment. Dwight Conquergood, the late professor of theatre at Northwestern University, compared propositional, abstract, and objective knowledge (what he called "map") with participatory, practical, and embodied knowledge ("story"), and argued that both kinds of knowledge are necessary, and must interact—especially within academic institutions in which "map" knowledge has predominated to the exclusion of story. According to Conquergood, performance studies uniquely fosters this overlap or cross-fertilization within the binary divisions that prevail in the academy. "Performance studies struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice. . . . Performance studies brings this rare hybridity into the academy, a commingling of analytical and artistic ways of knowing."⁷⁵ The real presence of human beings together in space and time is an essential element of performance. The elevation of embodiment as an equally important way

⁷³Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 27.

⁷⁴Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 27.

⁷⁵Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 145, 151; quoted in Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 31.

of knowing ("the view from a body"⁷⁶) offers a necessary corrective for the disembodied, text-centric approach that predominates in biblical studies ("the view from above"⁷⁷), and its inclusion will help narrow the cultural gap that exists between modern interpreters and ancient actors and audiences. I will return to this theme again below when discussing the implications of performance on scholars and scholarship.

Process

Process refers not only to the various steps involved in leading up to and including the performance event, but also the cultural exchange that happens between actors and audience in the midst of a performance, particularly in performances that purpose to affect change. Richard Schechner draws a helpful distinction in performance between efficacy and entertainment. Efficacious and entertaining performances are not "binary opposites" but "the poles of a continuum."⁷⁸ "No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment," but they do lean in one direction or the other, and the difference between them "depends mostly on context and function."⁷⁹ Performances that lean toward the "entertainment" end of the spectrum do not purpose primarily to affect change within the audience or the larger culture. Performances that lean toward the "efficacy" end, however, do desire to make a lasting impact. Examples of efficacious performances would include public protests, and (sacred or religious) rituals.⁸⁰ Mathews suggests one emphasis of a performance approach is a reminder that "the focus in performance is acting in/upon the world and the dynamic relationships between social, political and cultural spheres."⁸¹ Efficacious performances "shape and

⁷⁶Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 146.

⁷⁷Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 146.

⁷⁸Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 79.

⁷⁹Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 80.

⁸⁰Cf. Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 33.

⁸¹Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 32.

define the values and beliefs of cultures."⁸² The performances of Israel's sacred tradition, of the ancestral stories, would undoubtedly lean toward the "efficacy" end of Schechner's spectrum. As Erich Auerbach so poignantly remarked, in comparing biblical narrative to Homeric epic, "the Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels."⁸³ In other words, biblical performances intended not only to transport the audience to the world of the ancestors (or visa versa), but sought continually to transform the gathered people (back) into the people of God.

Implications of Performance on the Scholar

Calling the narratives "dramas" calls for a paradigm shift in biblical studies from text-oriented to performance-oriented approaches. This paradigm shift has significant implications for how scholars conduct research of the Bible, as well as the way scholars relate to the material they interpret. The preceding section on performance studies has anticipated some of these implications, and indeed the paradigm shift will be facilitated in part by biblical exegetes' willingness to engage the literature and practitioners of performance studies to learn from their unique combination of "analysis and action."⁸⁴ It will also require a willingness to adopt and learn new methods that incorporate both analytical and embodied ways of knowing.

Some biblical scholars have already begun to do this. David Rhoads is one such biblical scholar. He observes that although "we can never recover a first century performance event . . . we can experiment with twenty-first century ones. . . . If the biblical

⁸² Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 32.

⁸³ Auerbach. *Mimesis*, 11–12.

⁸⁴ Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 145.

writings were composed for performance, then we certainly should use performances to interpret these writings."⁸⁵ He continues, more emphatically:

Performance criticism involves a paradigm shift. It will not do simply to take the methodologies we have developed for analyzing print and apply them to oral composition. Performance in an oral culture presents serious challenges to biblical scholars trained in written texts. We need to accompany the media shift with methodological shifts and the development of new methods, skills, and models.⁸⁶

Rhoads is, in effect, calling on the community of biblical scholars to develop the skills of oral performance as a way of refining their capacity to interpret the Bible *as a scholar*. This is a call to change the definition of what it means to be a scholar, and the way the interpreter relates to the biblical text.

Rhoads identifies two insightful ways the scholar can relate to the biblical passage to facilitate this shift in perspective. First, "the exegete can interpret from the position of being part of the audience."⁸⁷ New methods are needed to accomplish this. Namely, scholars "will need to learn listening skills as we have traditionally learned reading skills—becoming empathetically involved, identifying with characters, being aware of our own emotions and reactions, discerning the cognitive challenges of a

⁸⁵ Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part II," 173.

⁸⁶ Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part II," 180–81. Cf. James Maxey: "[P]erformance challenges earlier models of communication and requires new methods for appreciating the epistemological shift involved in this mode of communication." Maxey, "Biblical Performance Criticism," 7. Diana Taylor makes the same argument from the perspective of performance studies. She compares the "repertoire"—the collection of "embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)"—to the "archive"—the "supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)." Taylor, *Archive and Repertoire*, 19. Mirroring Rhoads' argument, Taylor suggests performance studies can confront the overarching focus in the humanities on the "archive" by offering a new "way of rethinking the canon and critical methodologies. For even as scholars in the United States and Latin America acknowledge the need to free ourselves from the dominance of the text—as the privileged or even sole object of analysis—our theoretical tools continue to be haunted by the literary legacy. . . . It's imperative now, however overdue, to pay attention to the repertoire. But what would that entail methodologically? It's not simply that we shift to the live as the focus of our analysis, or develop various strategies for garnering information, such as undertaking ethnographic research, interviews, and field notes. Or even alter our hierarchies of legitimation that structure our traditional academic practice (such as book learning, written sources, and documents). *We need to rethink our method of analysis.*" Taylor, *Archive and Repertoire*, 27; emphasis added.

⁸⁷ Rhoads, "Performance as Research," 169.

narrative, suspending judgment."⁸⁸ Critical reflection on the performance is also helpful, as is experiencing multiple performances of the same script, so conclusions are not based on a single experience alone.⁸⁹

"Second, the exegete can interpret by taking on the role of a performer."⁹⁰ The exegete is generally thought of as a "recipient," not unlike a music or drama critic who attends a performance to gauge its critical value and meaning, as opposed to being a performer herself. Rhoads suggests that if the two roles were combined the exegete's exploration of and access to the meaning in the passage is expanded through both listening and performing. "Becoming the "voice" and the "embodiment" of a narrative or letter places the exegete in a relationship with the text that is quite distinctive from hearing a performance. It represents a different medium."⁹¹ Again, this calls for developing new skills, new methods. The position and location of the exegete's body in space has interpretive implications, physically moving from place to place within the story frame on the stage, discerning the interactions between characters, "recounting the narrative world from the narrator's perspective and standards of judgment," etc.⁹²

Both of the implications Rhoads identifies suggest the act of interpretation in performance requires not only the *personal* engagement of the interpreter, but *embodied* engagement. This line of reasoning was anticipated in the "embodiment" section above. Performance invites the scholar to bring her entire self into the interpretive process, not only her mind and her capacity to analyze. Embodied interpretation is not only—or even primarily—conducted by the scholar isolated in her office, reading the text silently. Rather, performance beckons her to abandon her office in favor of a more open space,

⁸⁸Rhoads, "Performance as Research," 169.

⁸⁹Rhoads, "Performance as Research," 170.

⁹⁰Rhoads, "Performance as Research," 170.

⁹¹Rhoads, "Performance as Research," 170.

⁹²Rhoads, "Performance as Research," 170.

preferably joined by colleagues or students who are researching the text with her in community. Biblical performance criticism calls for a (re)joining of analysis and practice, as Conquergood said above.⁹³ Peter Perry, who has also been influenced by Conquergood, recently suggested biblical performance criticism accomplishes this in part by understanding that "the performer is an analyst and the analyst is a performer."⁹⁴ The binary assumed between critical or objective engagement with a text on the one hand, and practical or emotional engagement with the text on the other is overcome. "Performance criticism offers a way to reunite analysis and practice."⁹⁵ In other words, the scholar relates in both objective (reading, analysis) and subjective (embodied engagement) ways to the biblical passage on the way to an interpretation.

Lesslie Newbigin, the British theologian, missiologist, and bishop in India, though neither a Bible scholar nor an advocate of biblical performance criticism, articulated the move toward acknowledging and embracing the subjective elements of interpretation that performance beckons. He offers his perspective by way of a critique of approaches which, regardless of the depth of their analysis, emphasize objective engagement with the text to the exclusion of the subjective.

It is possible to undertake the most exhaustive and penetrating examination of the biblical text in a way which leaves one, so to say, outside it. The text is an object for examination, dissection, analysis, and interpretation from the standpoint of the scholar. This standpoint is normally that of the plausibility structure which reigns in her society. From this point of view she examines the text, but the text does not examine her. . . . [M]ost biblical study as currently conducted is protected from that interruption. The text is examined, so to say, from the outside.⁹⁶

Newbigin's point, of course—as a priest and a missiologist—is that to examine the text "from the outside" by maintaining an objective distance from it is not consonant with

⁹³Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 145.

⁹⁴Perry, *Insights From Performance Criticism*, 31.

⁹⁵Perry, *Insights From Performance Criticism*, 32.

⁹⁶Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 97–8.

the nature of the text itself, which he understands to be sacred Scripture, a text that makes demands on those who read it and seek to interpret it. My argument, in addition to Newbigin's, is that it is not consonant with the text because the text is, in fact, a dramatic script.

Scripts that are not performed are incomplete. Dramatic scripts invite entrance; they are interpreted by being enfolded, incarnated through both body and voice. Peter Brook, an internationally acclaimed director and theatre critic, though not a Christian, nevertheless articulates a perspective on modern theater that also uses the language of incarnation. Brook names an essential aspect of theatre the Holy Theatre, which he defines as "The Theatre of the Invisible—Made—Visible."⁹⁷ The holy theatre manifests the invisible reality that is always present but rarely seen. In reflecting on a small theatre company in Poland led by Jerzy Grotowski, Brook relates the actor to a priest and the audience to a worshiping congregation.⁹⁸ "The priest performs the ritual for himself and on behalf of others. Grotowski's actors offer their performance as a ceremony for those who wish to assist: the actor invokes, lays bare what lies in every man – and what daily life covers up. This theatre is holy because its purpose is holy."⁹⁹ That holy purpose is bound up with the fact that holy theatre does not exist for itself; it is a means to an end, and a primary end is to offer "a possibility of salvation."¹⁰⁰ It is in making visible what is so often invisible that the holy theatre connects with the deep "hunger"¹⁰¹ of the audience to offer "salvation." Brook's understanding of salvation is decidedly secular, but his insight resonates deeply with the performance tradition of the Bible, and the telos of performance criticism of the Bible. As the actor(s) enter the

⁹⁷ Brook, *Empty Space*, 42.

⁹⁸ Brook, *Empty Space*, 59.

⁹⁹ Brook, *Empty Space*, 60.

¹⁰⁰ Brook, *Empty Space*, 59.

¹⁰¹ Brook, *Empty Space*, 44.

"script" and incarnate the biblical drama on stage the audience is confronted with the sacred in the form of the beloved ancestors who plead with them to return to YHVH and remind them of the consequences of not doing so.

Biblical performance criticism offers a way for scholars to enter the script. Or, to return to Newbiggin's language, to examine the text "from the inside." It offers not only an opportunity for the scholar to examine the Bible, but also for the Bible to examine the scholar. The exegete's relationship with the passage is changed through performance, but the exegete herself is often changed by the act of performance as well. James Maxey acknowledges that biblical performance criticism "celebrates" the inclusion of subjective engagement with the text into the interpretive process. "Biblical performance criticism cannot support a position of objectivity or neutrality on the part of anyone involved in translation, a performance, or its evaluation. In performance, the performer is the medium. And people are not neutral."¹⁰²

In the remainder of this chapter I will lay out the steps involved in applying biblical performance criticism to an Old Testament drama. This will build on the methodological work of David Rhoads and others, but will largely be drawn from the experience I have gleaned over the last decade of developing, refining, and practicing biblical performance criticism with hundreds of students at Western Theological Seminary, under the tutelage of my colleague and mentor, Dr. Tom Boogaart.

Oral Text, Oral Approach: Biblical Performance Criticism

Three decades ago Meir Sternberg made a considerable contribution to the development of narrative criticism, which was just maturing beyond its infancy in 1987 with the publication of his tome *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. His opening chapter,

¹⁰²Maxey, "Biblical Performance Criticism," 10.

titled "Literary Text, Literary Approach"¹⁰³ laid the groundwork for his pursuit of the poetics undergirding and expressed through biblical narrative. The logic was that, since the text was fundamentally literary in character, the most appropriate way to discern its meaning is by applying the tools and skills of professional readers, a case Robert Alter had likewise made some years earlier in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.¹⁰⁴ This volume is narrower in scope and scale than the likes of Sternberg's and Alter's classic volumes, but a similar logic informs the present study: biblical performance criticism is an oral approach to an oral text.

Biblical performance criticism is a relatively "young" approach to interpreting the Bible. In 2006 David Rhoads called it an "emerging methodology" in his field of Second Testament studies.¹⁰⁵ It has been developing at an even slower rate in First Testament studies. However, the last ten years since he published his two part essay "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies" has seen an explosion of research into both the orality of Israel and performance traditions in ancient Israel and first century Palestine. For example, there are presently fourteen volumes published in the Biblical Performance Criticism series by Wipf and Stock (Cascade) of which David Rhoads is the series editor—recently joined by Kelly Iverson and Holly Hearon. Most of the books in the series deal with New Testament issues, but the Old Testament is the subject of growing emphasis.¹⁰⁶ Terry Giles and William Doan

¹⁰³Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 1–57.

¹⁰⁴Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*.

¹⁰⁵Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part I" and "Performance Criticism—Part II." James Maxey notes the publication of these two essays as the moment the method "began to gain traction" in the academic community. Maxey, "Biblical Performance Criticism," 2.

¹⁰⁶Of the fourteen books, only one so far deals directly with Old Testament narratives by treating the book of Ruth. Several deal with issues related to orality in either ancient Israel or first century Palestine—or both. Some deal primarily with issues of translation and the impact of performance on that practice. And a number of the volumes deal directly with New Testament texts, or the New Testament world. The fourteen books in the series are as follows, in order of publication date (I have included the year of publication only here in this list for ease of reference and comparison): Hearon and Ruge-Jones, *Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, 2009; Maxey, *From Orality to Orality*, 2009; Clark Wire, *The Case for Mark*, 2011; Miller, *Oral Tradition*, 2011; Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel*, 2012; Maxey and

have published several articles along with three full-length books (one of which is in the series just mentioned) that all focus on the Old Testament, treating the prophets,¹⁰⁷ songs situated within narratives,¹⁰⁸ and the story of Naomi/the book of Ruth,¹⁰⁹ respectively. Tom Boogaart has published two essays offering insights from performance on the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22:1–19,¹¹⁰ and Elisha and the Bands of Aram in 2 Kings 6:8–23.¹¹¹ Jeanette Mathews's exploration of performance with the prophetic book of Habakkuk has been well received.¹¹² Performance critical approaches to the Psalms of Ascent and the book of Lamentations are being pursued by doctoral students around the world.¹¹³

Biblical performance criticism can be fruitfully applied to many different genres in both the Old and New Testaments, as the brief survey above illustrates. The methodology I have been describing, and describe in greater depth below, is primarily applicable to the narrative corpus. The method will look different when applied to the psalms or prophetic texts, for example. Indeed, as a discipline that is still in its infancy, biblical performance criticism is not practiced in a uniform way, even when applied to similar genres of biblical material. Mathews identifies three different ways that biblical performance criticism is presently practiced among the scholars who apply it to both testa-

Wendland, *Translating Scripture for Sound and Performance*, 2012; Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible*, 2013; Dewey, *Oral Ethos of the Early Church*, 2013; Horsley, *Text and Tradition*, 2014; Iverson, *From Text to Performance*, 2014; Boomershine, *The Messiah of Peace*, 2015; Weissenrieder and Coote, *Interface of Orality and Writing*, 2015; Giles and Doan, *Story of Naomi*, 2016; Oestreich, *Performance Criticism of the Pauline Letters*, 2016.

¹⁰⁷Giles and Doan, *Prophets, Performance, and Power*.

¹⁰⁸Giles and Doan, *Twice Used Songs*.

¹⁰⁹Giles and Doan, *Story of Naomi*.

¹¹⁰Boogaart, "Arduous Journey," 3–21.

¹¹¹Boogaart, "Drama," 35–61.

¹¹²Cf. Val Billingham, review of *Performing Habakkuk*, *Colloquium* 45, no. 1 (May 2013), 111–13; Lee A. Johnson, review of *Performing Habakkuk*, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (July 2014), 532–34.

¹¹³E.g., Melinda Cousins recently completed a dissertation incorporating performance to interpret the Psalms of Ascent through Charles Sturt University in Sydney, Australia. It is titled "Pilgrim Theology: Worldmaking through Enactment of the Psalms of Ascents (Pss 120–134)." Heather Pillette is a PhD student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, and is interested in issues related to performance and the book of Lamentations.

ments. In the first place, some see performance as a metaphor for the task of theological reflection,¹¹⁴ or for the practice of discipleship that takes the Eucharist as the focal point of Christian performance.¹¹⁵ For example, Sam Wells used the metaphor of improvisation as the central theme of his theology of ethics.¹¹⁶ In the second place, scholars like Mathews herself use performance criticism to uncover "intrinsic performative aspects in the texts as they stand."¹¹⁷ This approach, what Mathews calls "finding performance *in* biblical traditions,"¹¹⁸ is generally applied in one of three ways: "(1) those who focus on particular aspects of performance theory and apply them to a text; (2) those who see the traditions themselves as having been deliberately composed as dramas; and (3) those who illuminate the intrinsic performative qualities in the text."¹¹⁹

The third approach, what Mathews calls the "performance *of* biblical traditions," in which "the scholars are interested in the performance *of* the material"¹²⁰ is the kind of approach I have been advocating for, and describe in detail below. I offer this description of biblical performance criticism with the understanding that it has its own integrity as a critical methodology, and yet it is in constant dialogue with many other disciplines, most notably narrative criticism.¹²¹ On the path to performance, form criticism was the trailhead; historical, social-scientific, cultural, rhetorical, liberationist, and other approaches are signposts; and narrative criticism is the primary landmark that eventually leads the scholar-pilgrim to the performance itself.

¹¹⁴E.g., Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*; VanHoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*.

¹¹⁵Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*.

¹¹⁶Wells, *Improvisation*.

¹¹⁷Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 57.

¹¹⁸Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 57.

¹¹⁹Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 57.

¹²⁰Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk*, 54.

¹²¹For a helpful overview of the way the way performance criticism (understood as the performance *of* biblical traditions) interacts with other criticisms in mutually-affecting ways, see David Rhoads' insightful essay, already referred to in this chapter: Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part II," 164–184.

*A Medium-Oriented Methodology: Steps to Interpretation**Select/Translate the Script*

The first step is to choose which drama is to be performed. Will it be the binding of Isaac, the coronation of Saul, or Jael's murder of Sisera? This decision will be informed by a number of factors: the performance context, the length of time available, the performance space, number of actors and number of characters, as well as other considerations. Once the drama is selected the boundaries of the script must be determined. Every drama has a beginning, middle, and end, but it is not always clear where those boundaries lie, and sometimes the imposed framework of chapters and verses do not align with the true boundaries of the drama. Narrative criticism can help to establish these boundaries with its careful attention to these textual details. When the boundary is defined, the next decision relates to translation. In my own practice I generally do not perform the dramas in English translation; choosing instead to perform them in the original Hebrew, using the Masoretic Text as it appears in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Even when the performance is in Hebrew, however, an English translation is always read beforehand to (re)familiarize the audience with the story, since no one in the audience is fluent in Biblical Hebrew.

Whether the English translation is read aloud (which, of course, is a kind of performance) before an ensemble¹²² performance in Hebrew, or is the version performed, I prefer to use my own translation over any modern translations. I attempt

¹²²I will discuss this later on, but the performances I generally participate in involve an ensemble cast as opposed to a single storyteller. The inclusion of several "cast members" significantly increases the interpretive potential of performance by allowing for features like simultaneous action, as well as visibly creating space on stage between characters or locations on stage, which opens the possibilities for symbolic representation. For example, in a performance of the healing of Naaman in 2 Kgs 5, the king of Aram and the king of Israel sit on thrones on opposite sides of the stage throughout the performance, representing the horizontal axis of power manifested in kingdoms, while Elisha's house is located downstage to represent the vertical axis of power, which comes from service to YHVH and does not participate in the destructive act of taking by force characteristic of kingdoms and seen in the behavior of Naaman first, and Gehazi last (see Chapter 5 for a thorough analysis of 2 Kgs 5).

to accomplish several things in a translation. I try to keep intact idiomatic expressions in the Hebrew that imply concrete actions. For example, in 2 Kings 5:1 the Narrator describes Naaman, the protagonist, as being "highly respected" (NASB), "highly regarded" (TNIV), or "in high favor" (NRSV). The Hebrew phrase is וַיִּשָּׂא פָנָיו (*unsu' phanim*), which means "his face was lifted up." Rather than translating for meaning accessible to a silent reader (e.g. "highly respected"), I translate this literally, and the meaning is clearly communicated in performance when the king of Aram raises his hand before the face of Naaman, who is kneeling before him, allowing Naaman to stand in the presence of his lord. This example clearly illustrates the veracity of David Rhoads' assertion that live performances are critical to the translation, indeed the performance *is* the translation "in a new medium. Here we would be dealing . . . with noises, gestures, movement, facial expressions, volume and inflection, pace, and so on. Performers would work to bring to expression the explicit and implicit suggestions for performance in the original text."¹²³ Several other considerations must be made in preparing a translation for performance, but there is not adequate space here to discuss them. Two books by James Maxey discuss the matter in depth, and from a variety of perspectives, with reference to both Old and New Testament issues.¹²⁴

Internalize the Script

Before a biblical drama can be performed it must be internalized by the performer(s). I intentionally do not use the term "memorize" here. Memorization is akin to writing the words on the back of one's eyelids. This reduces the act of internalization to a *visual* exercise ("reading" the words off the eyelids, instead of a page) that maintains

¹²³Rhoads, "Art of Translating," 33.

¹²⁴Maxey, *Orality to Orality*; and Maxey and Wendland, *Translating Scripture*.

objectivity between reader and text.¹²⁵ Internalization involves writing the words on the heart. Dennis Dewey also resists the term "memorization," and instead advocates for the phrase "learn by heart." For Dewey, learning "by heart" is a "process that entails deep immersion in the text, the internalization not just of sounds but of feelings, images, complexes of visualizations of setting, character, and narrative structure, all of it 'clothed' with the words of the text."¹²⁶ Internalization is engagement with the words to the degree that they become a part of the performer. In the great *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6, Moses told the Israelites that the way for them to love the Lord their God with all the heart, soul and strength was to "let these words that I am commanding you today be *on your hearts*."¹²⁷ This is subjective engagement, where the script becomes another subject with whom the interpreter/performer has a relationship characterized not just by careful analysis, but by intimacy and love as well. As a Christian scholar, I consider this an essential element. The interpreter still engages the Bible critically, but the Bible also exerts its own influence on the interpreter. Internalization moves in both directions—the script gets inside the scholar so the scholar can get inside the script.

Also implied in the quote from Dewey above is the embodied learning of the script. To internalize the words of the drama is more than a cerebral exercise and implicates the entire body of the interpreter. Internalization of this sort is best done standing up (as opposed to sitting down), and the script should be spoken aloud as it is being learned (listening to a recording of it is also extremely helpful, especially if one is

¹²⁵For more on the move away from the term "memorization" in biblical performance criticism, see Perry, *Insights From Performance Criticism*, 39–40; Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part I," 125; and Ward and Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life*, 70.

¹²⁶Dewey, "Performing the Living Word," 154. Dewey goes on to relate this level of engagement with a passage to an act of prayer.

¹²⁷Dennis Dewey has mused that this may "allude to [a] commonly known methodology for the internalization of the texts. Does this reference give us any clue as to a technique for 'keeping the words' in a culture that was essentially oral? We tend to regard this corollary as a quaint figure of speech. But that may be because we who have mastered the technologies of literacy can hardly conceive of living and learning in an oral/aural world." Dewey, "Mnemonics of the Heart," 5.

learning it in the original Hebrew). Movements can be helpfully paired with words to make physical, bodily connections between the flow of words. In my experience my body often reminds my brain what the next word is because it remembers the next movement, even when my brain cannot yet recall the next word or phrase. If the drama will be performed by an ensemble cast, it is also extremely helpful, as well as much more fun, to spend some time learning the script together as a group. Games can even be introduced to help create recitation situations more akin to a performance than simply saying the entire passage straight through.¹²⁸

Block the Script

"Blocking" refers to the various staging decisions required to facilitate the performance. It includes the arrangement of the stage itself, the various locations where actors will stand and when they will stand there, when and where they move (and how fast), when they enter or leave the stage, etc. In short, it has to do with the entire physical, spatial dimensions of the staging of the script, but also includes more intangible elements such as tone of voice, dramatic silences or pauses, pacing, etc. All of these elements are done intentionally and should be considered carefully throughout the rehearsal period. It is through this process of blocking the performance that the

¹²⁸With an ensemble performance each character would speak only their lines. It is one thing to "memorize" all of the words of a biblical drama; it is another thing to be able to anticipate when your character's lines will begin, while also remembering where to stand, where to look, and how to say the line, etc. Theatre games, such as a modified version of the game "zip zap zog" have been helpful in taking the internalized script to the next level, especially when learning in Hebrew. In this game everyone stands in a circle facing inwards. One person begins by reciting the first phrase in the passage, or however length they desire. If the group has developed hand motions to coincide with the recitation, the entire group would do the motions as the individual recites. When they complete a phrase they jump into the air, clap their hands, and as they land point to another member around the circle. The sound and movement act as a distraction that forces deep concentration, preparing each member for the level of focus necessary for the eventual performance situation. The person who is pointed to then provides the next phrase, then jumps, claps, and points to another member of the circle. The game continues for as many rounds through the script (or the portion of the script learned) as is necessary.

actors truly begin to "enter" the script as the world of the drama materializes in rehearsal. A term I often use to describe this process is "embodied exegesis."¹²⁹

The type of theatre recommended is "minimalist." This approach does not concern itself with costumes or the creation of a set. Props are kept to a minimum. This is an important point. If props are included, they should be limited to one or two at most. The "less is more" principle applies here: the less props used the greater significance each prop takes on within the performance frame and can help serve to unlock latent meaning in the script. For example, in the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19), if the only prop used is a knife, it builds tension and becomes a focal point of dramatic action, which builds to climax during the sacrifice scene. Further, the meaning, tension, and emotions associated with the knife take on even greater significance when that same knife is used to slit the ram's throat (instead of Isaac's) after cutting Isaac free from his bonds.

The spacing decisions actors are forced to make throughout the blocking process—the orientation of the stage, each character's position onstage relative to the other characters and audience, etc.—grant the interpreter access to layers of meaning latent in the script, and then provide a mechanism whereby these latent dimensions are brought to visible expression. Often this meaning is accessed by identifying "gaps" in the story. Recognition of these gaps often leads to asking interesting questions, questions that otherwise would never have been considered by silent, isolated reading practices, however imaginative. One example, discussed in Chapter 1, is: How does Isaac get off the altar? This question, hardly discussed in the voluminous literature on Genesis 22, holds consequential theological and interpretive meaning.

¹²⁹Embodied exegesis is simply a descriptive term for biblical performance criticism.

Another example from the same drama concerns the blocking of God's initial words to Abraham in Genesis 22:2, "Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac. And go to the land of Moriah. And offer him up there as a whole burnt offering, upon one of the mountains about which I will tell you." The first and most fundamental question is: where is God when these lines are delivered? God is clearly a character in the drama, and God's location on (or off) the stage in relation to Abraham has theological implications for how this interaction and God's command to Abraham is received. What is communicated if God is close to Abraham, kneeling over, looking lovingly and compassionately at him while he sleeps? What is communicated if God stands across the stage, straight faced, body rigid, demanding the sacrifice of his beloved child? What is communicated if God is a disembodied voice coming from off stage, the words shattering the fragile safety Abraham had enjoyed with his son up to this point? These questions, and others like them, guide the blocking process and guide the performers along the way to discovering layers of meaning embedded within the script, in and between the words, that will come to their fullest expression in performance.

Research the Script

The process of blocking out the script inevitably raises important questions related to culture, social customs, history, and language; it reveals issues related to power, geopolitics, socioeconomics, identity, community, vulnerability, and oppression. Many of these issues cannot be resolved simply by rehearsing them, but nevertheless must be expressed in performance. I have already said that biblical performance criticism has its own integrity as a critical methodology, but is in constant dialogue with the other disciplines. This is the point at which this dialogue becomes essential. For example, in order to block the scene in The Bands of Aram (2 Kings 6:8–23) in which the

king of Aram outlines his plan to ambush the cities of Israel from a base camp (2 Kings 6:8), research must be conducted into the ancient concept of cartography and how the king may have illustrated the army's movements to his counselors—drawing on the ground with a stick, moving objects on a table to representative sites, pointing to the cities from a high place, etc.? Performances are greatly enhanced when the results of other critical approaches are taken into account. Indeed, it is perhaps not too much to say that the event of performance is the ultimate end toward which these insights were discovered, whether that was the intention of the historical, narrative, or post-colonial critic or not. Discernment will need to be employed when choosing which insights from which other methodologies to include. The blocking process must guide this discernment process. The questions raised along the way will dictate what resources to engage, and which insights to incorporate. Features of space, number of actors, available props, the setting and context of performance (whether it is in worship, its own event, or a mainstage production) will all contribute to guiding the process, and are all relevant filters to use to isolate the most helpful contributions from other critical approaches.

Perform the Script

The performance is, of course, the most important step in the process, and the event toward which every other step is directed. The entire process is oriented toward preparing the performer or ensemble cast for the event of performance; all of the preparations come to bear in this event. Anyone who has participated in a performance and prepared for it through rehearsals knows that the event of performance is fundamentally different from rehearsal, and often is the occasion for new insights to be discovered by the performers *as* they perform. These insights may be initiated by audience participation, such as laughing at an unexpected time (e.g., when Sarah

responds to the Angel saying she did not laugh *in Hebrew*, Genesis 18:15), or letting out a collective sigh when the tension breaks (e.g., when Naaman rises up from the Jordan River healed, 2 Kings 5:14). This could also be occasioned by an unexpected moment of eye-contact with someone in the audience, or perhaps when an experience of audience participation that is built-into the performance that was un-rehearsable is more illuminating than anticipated (as in a performance when the audience stood up and waved yellow and red papers in the air when Elisha's servant's eyes are opened to behold the horses and chariots of fire surrounding him and Elisha, 2 Kings 6:17).

David Rhoads has experienced this through several decades of performing New Testament passages for live audiences. He reflects, "I regularly discover new meanings of a line or an episode or a point of argumentation in the course of preparing for a performance *and in the act of performing itself*. In this way, performances can confirm certain interpretations, can expand interpretive possibilities, and can set parameters on viable interpretations."¹³⁰ Not only does the performance often prompt deeper insights into the passage, it can also confirm (or reject) certain interpretive decisions the performers made when blocking it. Multiple performances of the same drama will regulate the interpretation while also continually breathing fresh insight into the passage, thus echoing the very process in which the stories were originally transmitted.

Analyze the Performance

The final step of the process is to critically reflect back on the entire process. If the performance was done by an ensemble cast, it is beneficial to debrief the performance event with the entire cast to complete the loop of engaging the passage as a community of interpreters. This space provides an opportunity for the cast to

¹³⁰Rhoads, "Performance as Research," 170, emphasis added.

remember and to process the insights that may have occurred to them during the performance, enriching each member's experience and understanding of the drama. If it is possible, it can be illuminating to debrief the performance with the audience, especially if the performance takes place in the context of corporate worship. Like any form of art, more is communicated than is intended. Reader-response criticism has raised the challenge to historical-criticism's hyper-focus on a single, original meaning by arguing that, to an certain extent, interpretation is in the eye of the beholder. Rhoads proposes shifting the reader-response to an "audience-response" approach to compensate for the shift from silent readers to participatory audiences that help performers locate and communicate meaning in the drama.¹³¹

There is also merit to reflecting on performances in writing and through publications. Although the performance is an *event*, and that event is the climax of the interpretive process, and although the performance-as-event cannot be reduced to explanation, and written-reflection perhaps partly reverses the paradigm shift back to textual-orientation, written reflections on the experience can nevertheless be helpful as a way to consolidate what was learned along the way, and to share more broadly and in traditional scholarly circles the insights gleaned into the passage through performance. Emphasis on performance is not a rejection of textuality or the written word. A legalistic commitment to the performance mode will be unhelpful in affecting change in the scholarly conversation concerning biblical interpretation, and about the use of performance toward that end.

¹³¹Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part II," 167.

Conclusion

This article began with the assertion that the best genre designation for the biblical narratives is drama, which constitutes a paradigm shift in biblical studies away from a text-oriented approach to a medium-oriented approach, such as performance. I proceeded to discuss the complex term "performance," providing a definition based on the term's etymology and focusing it to fit with the biblical context. Following this I drew on performance theorists in order to consider more carefully what is at stake in the act of performance, such as the peculiar experience of time created by a performance context in which the past and present coalesce ("ghostliness"), and the importance of "framing" the performance space in such a way as to communicate that something extra-ordinary is going to take place, which is at once connected to and transcends beyond normal, everyday life.

The final section of the article was devoted to articulating a methodology that incorporates orality and performance into the interpretive approach. This methodology is suitable for biblical narratives, and is rooted in an ensemble performance approach, instead of a single storyteller, although that approach can also reveal dimensions of meaning in the scripts that silent reading cannot access. There are six basic steps to the methodology called biblical performance criticism when applied to the dramas: 1. Select/translate the script; 2. Internalize the script; 3. Block the script; 4. Research the script; 5. Perform the script; and 6. Analyze the performance.