All Scholarship is Personal: David Rhoads and Performance Criticism

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Various commentators and historians have said, “In the end, all politics is personal.” The statement calls attention to the fact that the major forces that shape national and international politics are finally about the life and work of individuals. The same is true for biblical scholarship and the megatrends of the interpretation of the Bible in the church and in the wider culture. In the end, all biblical scholarship and interpretation of the Bible is personal. A specific example of this is the evolution of performance criticism and the person, David Rhoads. As a lifelong friend, I am in a privileged position to tell the story of this evolution. With David’s permission, my purpose here is to tell some of the stories, both personal and communal, that have shaped this development. My purpose is also to reflect on the character and implications of performance criticism. Whether this development is of historic importance for biblical scholarship and the interpretation of the Bible in the church and the wider culture only time will tell. But it may be of immediate interest to the community of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) as it reflects on the impact of David’s tenure as professor of New Testament and on the institution’s future. In the end, the community will decide whether performance criticism in its various dimensions is a personal idiosyncrasy of David Rhoads and his friends or a new paradigm for the future of the understanding, interpretation, and communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

Beginnings

My first vivid memory of David is of an encounter we had in the lobby of the Marriott Hotel in New Orleans in 1977. It was my second annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). I had met David the year before at SBL. He had become an instant hero to me because he had read my dissertation, *Mark the Storyteller*, and thought it was important. He came across the lobby quickly and said with some anxiety, “Tom, do you by any chance know where I can get a room? They’re all booked up.” As it happened, I had reserved a room and had no roommate. That was the first year of our rooming together at SBL for the next twenty years. My memory is like Andrew’s story of his first meeting with Jesus at four o’clock in the afternoon (John 1:38–40). One remembers the beginnings of significant relationships.

David was involved in the Mark Seminar as well as the Literary Aspects of the Gospels and Acts group at SBL because of his ongoing work on Mark as a narrative that soon (1982) resulted in his book, *Mark as Story*. That book was framed as narrative criticism, and approached Mark as a narrative written for readers.
This decision was related to the intended audience of college and seminary students who would read Mark in silence. This was appropriate for David and his co-author, Donald Michie, who was also teaching at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. This work was one of the early fruits of a movement within biblical scholarship that focused on Mark and other works of the New Testament as unified narratives rather than as the product of a tradition history process that could be traced by

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the methods of form, source, and redaction criticism. It was a ground-breaking work because it used the categories of narrative (point of view, narrative comments and asides, plot, characterization, norms of judgment) and the analysis of the interactions of the narrator, the reader, and the narrative itself with its characters and plot as a methodological center for a comprehensive analysis of Mark.

This work helped to establish narrative criticism as a viable methodology for the study of biblical narratives. The central move of this development was taking the literary critical methods that had been developed for the study of the modern novel and applying those methods to biblical narratives. A central presupposition of this critical methodology was that the work itself had meaning in and of itself as a narrative that was more than the sum of the various causal forces that determined its present form. Narrative criticism focuses on the interactions of the narrator, the reader, and the narrative itself with its characters and plot.

David and I shared this interest. I had been a student of Wayne Booth, who was a leading figure in the development of new literary critical methods for the study of the novel. His book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, was a pioneering work that introduced categories such as reliable and unreliable narrators, the implied author, and the dynamics of distance in characterization to literary criticism. My 1974 dissertation, *Mark, the Storyteller: A Rhetorical Critical Study of Mark’s Passion and Resurrection Narrative*, had been a comprehensive study of Mark’s climactic narrative based on James Muilenburg’s proposal of a “rhetorical criticism” for the study of biblical tradition but that also adapted Booth’s methodological categories.

Both David and I were aware, however, of the historical discontinuity between Mark and the modern novel because we had both begun telling Mark’s story. This grew out of the basic historical critical impulse to seek an understanding of the works of the New Testament in their original historical context. We recognized that the modern novel and the literary critical methods for its study were a development of the seventeenth century through the twentieth century, not of the first century. We both knew that Mark’s story was primarily told from memory and was part of a radically different media culture in which literacy and the distribution of books were much different from the period after the printing press with its

mass literacy and mass publishing. Each of us had learned Mark by heart and had begun telling the story in classes, coffee houses, and churches.

As a result of our conversations at SBL, our ongoing study, and our experimentations with the performance of Mark, I took the initiative (1982–1983) to establish first a consultation and then a research group called “The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media.” The purpose of this group was to develop a methodology for the interpretation of the Bible in both the media culture of the ancient world and the media world of the post-literate electronic age of the late twentieth century. This group provided a context in which a group of scholars could explore topics that were not part of “normal” biblical scholarship. One of those topics was the performance of books of the New Testament.

Thus, in 1986, a session of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media group was titled “The Bible as Oral Text.” Following presentations by Lou Silberman on the cantillation of the Scriptures in the synagogue and Nicholas Kastamas of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology on the chanting of the Scriptures in Orthodox churches, I made a presentation on critical moments in the Greek text of Mark as an oral text and David concluded the session with a dramatic performance of Mark 1—3:6. The audiences for these presentations were small. Nevertheless, the energy as well as controversy that they generated was much greater than the attendance would initially indicate. David’s presentation at SBL was the first part of a dramatic performance of the whole of Mark that David had begun to do, primarily in Lutheran churches but also in various schools, retirement communities, and prisons. These performances of Mark were a major source of new knowledge about the New Testament in its original context.

For those who have heard David’s various performances, it may be well to remember that we did not know then whether a performance of Mark or Galatians or the Revelation to John was viable and could even hold an audience’s attention because no one had done it before. It is also well to remember the risks that David took in putting himself out there in unknown territory and to celebrate his courage and creativity. These were significant steps in the understanding of the New Testament in its original context and in the interpretation of the New Testament in a post-literate age.

Then LSTC appeared on the horizon as a possible location for David’s work. I remember this period well because it was a source of both hope and anxiety. While he loved his work at Carthage College, David really wanted to teach in a theological seminary and had candidated for other positions that did not result in an appointment. LSTC was the ideal place in virtually every way. I remember a phone conversation we had just prior to the interview. We talked for over two hours and went through all of the questions we could identify that he might be asked and evaluated possible responses. We agreed that it was important to ask questions and to engage in dialogue, as well as to give responses, in order to establish a spirit of collaboration and mutual engagement. That approach proved to be helpful in the interview process and established a spirit that David has continued during his years at LSTC. The confirmation of the appointment was a great joy and our hopes have been abundantly fulfilled. LSTC has proven to be an ideal place for the development of David’s gifts as a teacher/scholar and for the integration of many dimensions of what we would now call performance criticism into a seminary’s curriculum.

This realization about the importance of dialogue is also related to performance criticism. The stories and letters of the
New Testament were composed for performances that were highly interactive and involved implicit dialogue between those who were telling a Gospel or reciting a letter with their audiences. One of the ongoing discussions in which we are engaged is the degree of this implicit dialogue with the audience in ancient performances and in performance today. David has from the beginning developed the models of performance from dramatic presentations and has received coaching from drama directors. What he learned from drama shaped his performance of Mark. For example, he has been guided by the notion of being “on stage” with the audience looking through the imaginary “fourth wall.” This results in most of the conversations in the performance of Mark, for example, being “on stage” with the audience looking through the imaginary “fourth wall” at these interactions. I came to storytelling after a long period of professional involvement with drama during which I wrote a series of religious dramas and musicals and performed as an actor in a number of plays. I have been impressed by the differences between drama and storytelling and have pursued the distinctive character of storytelling. This approach results in the speeches and dialogues of Jesus in Mark or John being addressed directly to the audience so that there is no “fourth wall.” The question of the character of “audience address” in the performance of New Testament compositions is an ongoing subject of research and debate as well as experimentation in performance.

This “on stage” approach to the implicit dialogues of New Testament compositions was particularly apparent in David’s performance of Galatians at SBL. The annual meeting of SBL in Chicago in 1988 was the occasion for a major symposium on Paul’s letter to the Galatians that involved Pauline scholars from all over the world. David had learned Galatians by heart and offered to perform it for a session that would be jointly sponsored by the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media (BAMM) group and the Pauline groups that were sponsoring the symposium. Once again, we had no idea how this would be received because it was an unprecedented venture. As co-chair of BAMM along with David’s colleague and co-author, Joanna Dewey, I was involved in making the various arrangements, including the setup of the room. I remember it well because it turned out to be our largest audience, over 200, for a session of BAMM until then. Of course, the real importance of this occasion was not the size of the audience but the establishment of the historical probability that Galatians was actually performed either by Paul himself or more probably by an authorized reciter who learned the letter by heart and recited it as Paul’s representative, with or without a manuscript, for the Galatian congregations. David recited the letter in costume as Paul engaged in an imagined dialogue with the Galatians. While this was almost certainly not the manner of the original performances (in later performances he spoke directly to the audience as Paul’s listeners), it was highly effective and established that it was historically probable that the letter was composed for presentation for audi-

2. The “fourth wall” refers to the imaginary “wall” at the front of the stage through which the audience sees the action in the world of the play. The presence of the fourth wall is an established convention of fiction and drama. When this boundary is “broken,” for example by an actor onstage speaking to the audience directly, or doing the same through the camera in a film or television program, it is called “breaking the fourth wall.”
ences rather than to be read in silence as we now experience the letter.

**Performance criticism: a new paradigm**

Throughout these years, all of us engaged in this research were looking for an appropriate name for this new approach to biblical criticism. Implicit in the question of the name was the broader question: is this another discipline to be added to the methodological quiver of biblical criticism along with, for example, source, form, and redaction criticism or is this a new paradigm that involves a foundational shift in the basic understanding of the character of the Bible and the appropriate methods for its exegesis and interpretation?

The first appearance of “Performance Criticism” at SBL took place in a session of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media group in 2005. In that paper, a draft of which was first delivered at the inaugural session of the Network of Biblical Storytellers Seminar outside Houston in the summer of 2004, David described performance criticism as an emerging discipline in New Testament studies alongside the other methods of New Testament criticism. The foundation of the discipline is the recognition that the New Testament, and indeed the whole of the Bible, was originally a series of compositions that were always performed for audiences. The evidence for this is a combination of a range of data about performance practices and techniques in ancient rhetorical treatises, literacy rates in antiquity, the availability and character of ancient manuscripts, and the ubiquitous descriptions of public and private readings and recitations in ancient literature. In subsequent articles, David has outlined the ways in which the full range of disciplines can contribute to the clarification of the “big picture” dimensions of ancient performance of biblical texts—orality criticism, linguistic criticism, rhetorical criticism, sociological criticism, performance studies of ancient theater and rhetorical speeches—as well as the exegesis and translation of particular biblical books.

As the work on performance criticism has proceeded in recent years, it has become increasingly clear that performance criticism is not just another methodology to be added to traditional methods but is a cornerstone of a new paradigm for the interpretation of the Bible in its original context and in the context of the twenty-first century. The need for a new paradigm had been identified in earlier articles. One of the sources for recognition of this need was the study of the correlations between the history of communication technology and culture and the history of biblical interpretation.³ While the causal

relationships remain ambiguous, there is a direct correlation between the emergence of new communication systems and the development of new systems of biblical interpretation. This history clarifies the reason why performance criticism is the cornerstone for a new paradigm. Performance criticism is based on a reconception of both the original media of the Bible and the media of its interpretation in post-literate, digital culture.

A brief survey of this correlation may be helpful in clarifying this history. In the

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oral communication culture of ancient Israel, story was the primary mode of thought and storytelling the primary system of distribution. Oral culture is definitively shaped by the stories that are the defining center of tribal life. The traditional stories are reinterpreted and made relevant for later generations by retelling the stories. This interpretive system is evident in the retelling of the traditional stories of Israel by the Deuteronomist and the Priestly writer who retold the stories of the Pentateuchal tradition in the post-exilic context. It is also present in the New Testament in the four evangelists’ retellings of the stories of Jesus in the context of the aftermath of the Jewish war.

The emergence of literate culture in the Hellenistic culture of the centuries leading up to and following the life of Jesus was empowered by new technologies of writing and manuscript production and distribution that in turn made possible a critical mass of literate people. This literate community probably never exceeded 15 percent of the population even in the major urban communities of the ancient world but this literate minority shaped and controlled the economic, military, and political systems of the ancient world. The definitive interpretive system for literate culture was the world of ideas and the systems of philosophy. The church of the patristic period developed theology as its primary system of interpretation leading up to the creedal statements of the great ecumenical councils of the fourth through the sixth centuries. As a result of the prodigious labor of Origen, the greatest biblical scholar of the early church, allegorical interpretation became the dominant system for the interpretation of the Bible in this literate culture.

Allegorical interpretation in various forms remained the dominant system of biblical interpretation until the Reformation and the printing press. The invention of the printing press and the massive expansion of literacy that it generated were correlated with the development of print culture and the cataclysmic political, economic, and religious changes of the Reformation. This was the context for the formation of the Lutheran and Calvinist churches that were

in turn energized by the development of new systems of biblical interpretation based on the literal and figural interpretation of the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible that was pioneered by Martin Luther and John Calvin.

The development of historical criticism and modern methods of biblical interpretation that focus on the historical and theological meaning of the biblical texts is correlated with the emergence of the culture of mass literacy and silent reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The media culture of this period was defined by the transformation of written literature in general and the Bible in particular into documents that were studied in silence for their referential meaning as sources of historical and theological information. This new interpretive system and the new communication system of mass printing and mass distribution of the Bible were also connected with the development of theological education in the United States and the formation of seminaries such as LSTC. In response to the frequently chaotic conflicts and ever-new schisms and denominations that have followed the development of new interpretations of the Bible by various individuals and groups, historical criticism and an educated clergy provided a source of stability for the Protestant churches that have followed Luther’s norm for doctrinal legitimacy, sola scriptura. Thus, there has been a correlation between the major media changes in the history of western civilization and the major changes in biblical interpretation.

The development of electronic communication systems in the twentieth century is the most comprehensive change in communication technology since the development of literate culture in the ancient world. In every previous major change in communication technology and culture, a new paradigm for the interpretation of the Bible has made the Bible vital and meaningful in that new culture. When seen in the context of this history of the megatrends of biblical interpretation, the formation of a new paradigm for the interpretation of the Bible in what can be called digital culture is the most important task for the community of biblical scholarship.

The new paradigm in relation to the Bible’s historical context

A brief summary of some of the definitive characteristics of this new paradigm may help to clarify the importance of performance criticism. First, the Bible in its original historical context:

The Bible as sound. Rather than continuing to pursue the anachronistic study of the Bible as a text read in silence by ancient readers, historical scholarship needs to shape its methods for the study of the Bible as sound. Ancient authors composed manuscripts with the assumption that they would be performed and resounded for audiences. What is being called sound mapping of biblical texts in their original languages is a foundational step for the study of the Bible in its original medium.

The Bible as the source of communal memory. The role of memory in the transmission and interpretation of biblical compositions as well as the spiritual formation of individuals and communities


is essential to the understanding of the biblical tradition in its original cultural context. As Rhoads has frequently argued, the internalization and performance of biblical compositions “by heart” is a crucial step in the perception of the meaning of those compositions in the ancient world. The reassessment of the role of “social memory” as well as individual memory is another dimension of current interdisciplinary research.6

The Bible as communal oral tradition. The composers of the foundational stories of the biblical tradition, the Hexateuch and the Gospels/Acts, were setting in motion a communal oral tradition that depended on those works being learned by heart and transmitted by the people of the community. The commandments in the Shema to write the stories on your heart and to tell them to your children (Deut 6:6–7) reflect the fundamental dynamic of every member of the community becoming an agent for the transmission of the tradition. In the early church this expectation to tell the story was extended beyond the family of Israel to the nations of the Gentiles. The exploration of the processes of oral transmission of communal religious traditions needs to be an integral dimension of scholarly research.

The Bible as an anti-war, non-violent tradition. The re-conception of the Bible as oral compositions involves not only the redefinition of its medium but also of its content. When the stories of the Hexateuch and the Gospels/Acts are heard as a whole, their meaning and impact is experienced in a new context that reveals central dimensions of their content. Specifically, the stories of Israel’s wars and violence in the Hexateuch end as stories of tragedy rather than victory and peace. The kingdom of David ends on the tragic note of the death of Absalom and the conflicts between the northern and the southern kingdoms that ultimately end in the split between those two kingdoms and their ongoing history of conflict. Those stories end in the conquest of Israel by the Assyrians and of Judea by the Babylonians. Just as the stories of Israel and Judea received their final form in the post-war context of the exile, the Gospels and Acts received their final form in the context of the post-war period following the immense tragedy of the Jewish war. They are the stories of a non-violent Messiah who founded a movement that initiated a new community of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles. When told as ancient epics, the foundational stories of the Bible have a common content that stands over against the celebration of the heroic warrior and the glories of war that was the dominant theme of the epic stories of the Greco-Roman world.

The new paradigm in post-literate digital culture

These are some of the characteristics of the new paradigm of the Bible in post-literate digital culture:

The centrality of memory. As the source of vital spirituality and communal political and evangelical energy, the interiorization of the Bible in the memory of individuals and communities is a critical dimension of the role of the Bible in a digital age. At the same time that people are being bombarded by ever new appeals to memorize advertising jingles and inane song lyrics, the community of the Bible is called to make its traditions an integral part of individual and communal memory.

The performance of the Scriptures. Implicit in the recognition of the vitality of ancient performance of the Scriptures is the recognition that the performance of

the Scriptures in the church of the digital age is often dismal and boring. Among the performance traditions of the digital world, the Bible is on the one hand the most widely performed literary tradition in the world but it is also the most poorly performed. In most congregations, the performance of the Scriptures receives the least preparation and attention and is frequently a more or less meaningless, emotionless, and flat repetition of words and a dead time in the service. The invitation of the new paradigm is to perform the Scriptures by heart in every worship service of the church after extensive preparation, study, and interiorization.

The pedagogy of biblical study. The recognition of the Bible’s original character suggests that a new pedagogy of biblical study be developed for the seminaries and congregations of the church. That pedagogy will be based on the importance of oral performance as well as written papers as the end result of courses. This in turn will require the reconception of the pedagogy of graduate education for the training of biblical professors who at this point have no training in oral performance but are required only to write papers to get a PhD in biblical studies.

Translations for performance. At this point in history, scholars of texts produce biblical translations primarily for silent readers. This evolution of biblical translation has developed in the aftermath of the King James Version that has retained its popularity in part because of its performance values. In a digital age, biblical translation needs to be reoriented to performance, sound, and image.

Performance commentaries. The reorientation of biblical scholarship to the original character of biblical compositions will require the reorientation of commentaries to the meaning of the sounds and performance of these compositions for audiences rather than to the perceptions of ancient manuscripts by silent readers. Furthermore, the commentary literature needs to be redirected to contemporary audiences who will be interested in the experience of the literature as well as its analysis. This will mean that commentaries will need to include multimedia performances of the literature as well as written analysis.

The politics of peace and environmental conservation. The re-conception of the Bible as communal performance rather than individual reading also means that its meaning and impact address the communal issues of warfare and violence and the degradation of the earth as well as the salvation of individuals. It is not a coincidence that David Rhoads’ focus on the New Testament as performance literature has led to his leadership in the education and mobilization of the church in relation to the crisis in the global environment. The individual and communal dimensions of human relationship with God in the biblical tradition are intimately related.

These markers of a new paradigm are specific elements of a change in the conception of the medium of the Bible in both its original historical and contemporary contexts. That change in the conception of the medium of the Bible is the foundational shift that is implicit in the scholarship of David Rhoads. The hope implicit in this encomium is that David’s work at LSTC will be a foundation for the ongoing evolution of the educational program and spiritual life of the seminary that has been a place of grace for him and to which he has devoted a major part of his life as a scholar and teacher.