



Kelly R. Iverson

Performing Early Christian Literature: Audience Experience and Interpretation of the Gospels

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The importance (or even awareness, one should add) of understanding the gospel texts within their performative contexts has been negligible: “NT studies has developed an interpretive blind spot that has largely ignored the interplay between audience and performer” (12). Kelly Iverson’s study is an attempt to redress some of these issues relating to the gospels’ orality and performance, in that “we *must* endeavor to ‘imagine the oral period’ for the sake of historical authenticity” (13, quoting Dunn, *NTS* 49 [2003]: 149, Dunn’s emphasis).

Specifically, Iverson differentiates the hearing and seeing of a performance (an ancient oral reading of the gospels to a community of listeners) from a modern, private reading experience of the gospels (5), and to this end he examines the role of the audience and the factors that influence audiences in the communal event of the performance. A particular strong point of the study is the informed multidisciplinary examination, drawing “from a host of disciplines, including theatre, film studies, performance, communication, as well as the cognitive sciences (e.g., psychology and neuroscience)” (14). Iverson is not inflexible in his multifaceted approach; he works heuristically, employing procedures as “conversation partners” to consider “how audiences, situated in an oral context, interact and engage in the context of performance” (15).

Chapter 1 introduces Iverson’s purpose and methodology, articulating that he “will consider various aspects of the performer–audience relationship for the purposes of understanding how emotions, nonverbal communication, and memory shape interpretation in an oral event” (13).

Chapter 2, “Foundations of Audience Experience,” primarily considers basic aspects of a performative reading of a text that distinguish it from the individual, silent reading of a text. In the first part of this chapter Iverson astutely criticizes the widespread misunderstanding of (and consequent resistance to) the work of biblical scholars promoting orality studies as important to biblical scholarship. Our discipline’s acknowledgement of the real, “much needed ‘paradigm shift’ ... appears to be largely superficial” (20). Iverson identifies several foundational aspects of a performance event. First is the spatial proximity between performer and audience, allowing for a range of experiences that a spectator may be subject to, such as seeing the gestures and facial expressions of the performer. Second is community: in a performance, individual interpretation is shaped by intra-audience interaction, consisting of stimulation (e.g., laughter), confirmation (or reinforcement of responses), and integration at points in the recitation. Performance is a corporate or group experience. Transience is the third aspect: for the reader, the relative permanence of a book allows the individual to possess almost complete autonomy over the act of reading, such as control over the speed at which the material is processed. The transience of a live performance, of hearing a text, fundamentally changes how tradition is experienced. Fourth, performance is a sensory activity dependent on many perceptual cues. Unlike readers of a text, audiences see, hear, smell, and feel a performance (38). Finally, Iverson discusses participation as characteristic of performance. Here he takes issue with the (quite inadequate) “model of communication ... [serving] as the cornerstone for many interpretive methodologies” (45), a model that simplifies or contradicts the participatory hermeneutics of performance dynamics. There is an overlap “between performer, audience, and theatrical event ... because ‘production’ and ‘reception’ occur within the immediacy of the live, oral event where all parties are co-present ... [allowing] a range of communicative possibilities that go beyond the traditional literary model” (47).

The erudition in this chapter is exquisite but at the same time somewhat wanting with regard to contextual (early Roman Empire period) and historical embeddedness. It is the work presented in this chapter that probably needs to be extended by further research to open up relevant interpretive possibilities for New Testament scholarship.

Chapter 3 discusses the emotional experience of audience engagement at a performance event. Introducing this discussion, Iverson notes the neglect of emotions in the history of New Testament scholarship (53). The rest of this chapter is an excellent redress of this neglect. Among others, the science behind emotion contagion or empathy that is experienced when a person feels the expression of emotion by another person, including an actor in performance, is discussed. Then follows a typology of audience emotions and what implications these hold for performance (69–91), specifically emotions and attention and emotions and transfer of belief. How emotions influence audience experience is analyzed by means of illustrations from the gospels. For instance, Iverson argues that Mark’s portrayal of the disciples as obtuse is deliberately fashioned to cause an emotional division between the audience and the disciples (83), but the audience’s feelings of antipathy toward the disciples are tampered by other performance elements to “create an

emotional context whereby it is difficult for an audience to completely distance themselves from the disciples” (87). This grappling with the negative or ambiguous depiction of the disciples in Mark is, one can contend, precisely still wrestling with the chirographic heritage in Markan scholarship. The Gospel of Mark, as performance, can be deciphered as playing with ambiguity toward the Jesus story itself. Consider how the performance of the first statement (Mark 1:1) “should” be construed, including gesture, volume and tone—determining, in a way, all of the performance. Ambiguity in performative communication and its resolution can be the actual experienced meaning: the “good news” as such is a disturbing, frightening story; the life of service (10:43–44) is really hard, demanding literally *everything* of one (12:44), things that are possible only with God (10:27). Thus being full of fear and running away (16:8) are actual options for persons in the “Markan” audience.

Chapter 4 entails an examination of how nonverbal communication such as gestures and facial expressions affects audience experience and thus the interpretive process. Iverson notes that, “unlike the writer, the performer possesses a variety of tools to enhance and clarify the communication exchange, including facial expressions, gestures, body language, voice intonation, movement, and so on” (94). Both the importance of nonverbal communication and types of nonverbal communication are discussed. Biblical texts frequently include references to nonverbal dynamics, and Iverson explores how a skilled performer might attempt to reproduce nonverbal elements described in the narratives of the gospels and Acts. For instance, when John 12:13 indicates that people were “crying out” as Jesus traveled into Jerusalem, Iverson suggests that many lectors would have used an elevated and impassioned tone while vocalizing the passage. Avoiding such inflections could produce an awkward delivery, “creating an unnatural disjuncture between the content and style of the performance” (115). An important and valuable discussion of the performer as interpreter follows (118–23).

Chapter 5 considers memorial experience as an aspect of audience engagement. Iverson starts with an “introduction to memory,” which provides a useful review of recent scholarship that has seen a growing interest in the links between memory and tradition, but he emphasizes the relative lack of reflection on how memory functions in performance—particularly working memory, which is responsible for processing and analyzing sensory inputs during an oral performative event. Covering especially the research of Alan Baddeley, Iverson introduces the role and function of audience memory in an oral performance. Although working memory is capable of handling large amounts of data, it has an extremely limited storage capacity. Most information is actually discarded in a matter of seconds and does not get encoded into long-term memory.

Noteworthy is the fact that Iverson discusses the use of quotations, allusions, and echoes in gospel traditions, pushing back on scholars who note numerous cases of intertextuality. Of course, an astute reader may be able to detect a number of these references, but it is doubtful an audience would hear, retain, and identify each of such intertexts due to the cognitive ability of the average

listener. A listener is not able to go back and read a text as a reader can. Iverson observes that studies often fail to consider the performance setting and its associated implications when discussing intertextuality. Performance does evoke an unspoken context or untextualizable network of traditional associations, but that does not equate to the very complex process of simultaneously attending to an incoming stream of multisensory data, retention of information in the limited capacities of working memory, accessing previously stored tradition from long-term memory (assuming such a tradition exists), and engaging in a detailed analysis of the various traditions, all within the limited capacities of working memory (171–72).

Iverson raises really important questions about the kinds of interpretive activities that can be processed during and after performance, but one needs to know more about how performance critics conceptualize the role(s) they imagine physical texts to have in these conjectured performance events. Exploring the performative potential of ancient communal reading events surely entails attention to the manner in which writing was present and the functions assumed or parts played by these artifacts.

In his conclusion, Iverson brings the main lines of his study together, summarizing some theoretical and interpretive distinctions with regard to the chirographic bias of most New Testament scholarship. He again expresses frustration at our discipline's disregard for the importance of the oral and performative aspects of early Christian literature, noting that, despite James Dunn's eloquent plea for doing exactly this (in 2002, and, one may add, despite the work of scholars since the 1980s, including some South African scholars), the "obvious" has remained somewhat obscure (182–83).

Iverson is well-informed and sophisticated about philosophical issues, and it is relevant to note that what his investigation of performing early Christian literature does, among many things, is to create awareness of how particular and idiosyncratic modern (scholarly) reading is and how much it determines a rather distinct way of understanding communication, specifically undergirding a disembodied, mental, and idealistic conceptualization of meaning that results in rather problematic theologizing and ethical reflection (see 186).

A bibliography and indices of ancient texts and modern authors concludes the book. This volume is not only an excellent introduction to an important topic but can also serve as a useful textbook for performance criticism in New Testament scholarship.