

## **Biblical Performance Criticism: Performance as Research**

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Traditionally, scholars have studied the writings of the New Testament by reading them silently and in private. For centuries, we scholars have been treating these scriptures as “writings”—written to be studied and interpreted as manuscripts, written to be broken up into episodes and verses for scholarly analysis. We have been dealing with them as if they originated as part of a *print* culture. But this is not at all how the early Christians of the first century experienced the writings in the context of the oral cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world. It is the thesis of this paper that the contents of the writings that comprise the New Testament were originally composed and experienced orally. As such, the New Testament writings ought to be treated as remnants of *oral events*. That is, we need to study the writings of the New Testament as (trans)scripts of performances in an oral culture.

### **The New Testament as Oral Literature**

Treating the New Testament writings as oral literature is a “paradigm shift” that has enormous implications for the entire field of New Testament studies (Kuhn 1996). These collected writings did not arise as scripture on inked pages as we have experienced them in book form since the sixteenth century. Rather, the contents of the New Testament originated as oral stories and spoken, epic-like tales and rhetorical orations and oral-letters and theater-like performances. These traditions were most likely composed orally and then handwritten on scrolls of papyrus paper. The scripts of these oral events served the oral performances. The oral compositions preserved in the later manuscripts of the New Testament were not originally read privately or silently but were performed in social settings before gatherings of people. The compositions were most likely originally performed by memory, although they may also have been read aloud. And they were likely presented in their entirety, not broken up into smaller sections.

In order to gain an appropriate understanding of these New Testament writings as oral literature, we should study them in the same oral medium in which they originated. We need to imagine originating performance events in the context of the oral cultures of first-century Christianity. To do this, we need to revise our traditional disciplines of study and develop new

methodological tools of analysis. And we can use contemporary performance as a way to help bridge the media gap between the written and the oral.

On what grounds do we assert that the New Testament writings are remnants of oral events, namely, that they were composed orally, that they were probably performed from memory, and that they were most likely presented in their entirety? Here are some considerations to support these points.

1) *Oral cultures*. First and most obvious is the fact that the first-century world of the New Testament was comprised of oral cultures (Havelock 1963; Lord 1960; Niditch 1996; Draper 2004; Achtemeier 1990). Orality studies are teaching us a great deal about the societies of the ancient Mediterranean world as oral cultures. It is likely that only about three to ten percent of the people—mostly wealthy elites—were able to read and/or write (Gamble 1995; Harris 1986; Bar-Ilan 1992; Hezser 2001). In ancient societies, where there was no middle class, ninety percent or more of the people were non-literate peasants, urban dwellers, and expendables who experienced all language aurally. Everything they learned and knew, they knew by word of mouth. People had little or no direct contact with written language.

Predominantly oral cultures tend to be collectivist cultures. There was no individualism in the first century as we know it today. The identity of individuals came as part of their collective identity. In the collectivist cultures of the first century, there was little opportunity for privacy for most people. People lived together as large nuclear or extended families. Houses were open to neighbors, and marketplaces were centers of social interaction. Life was communal life. The point is that people were with other people virtually all the time, and what one person knew everyone knew. Knowledge was commonly-held social knowledge, because everyone in a village or a network talked with everyone else. Memory was social memory (Kirk and Thatcher 2005). In an oral culture, all expressions of language—information and instruction and wisdom and proverbs and stories—were embodied; that is, for almost everyone there was little or no experience of impersonal writing on a scroll unassociated with a person. Life was relational and social—face to face. Even those few who could write and/or read were steeped in orality.

Oral tradition-telling was, therefore, the common mode of communication in early Christianity. This came as informal gossip in the marketplaces or as teaching in the homes or as storytelling in ordinary conversation when recalling these traditions (Hearon 2004 and 2009; J. Dewey 1996; Wire 2002). There were also formal opportunities in marketplaces and open spaces between villages and assembly halls and house churches and synagogues and other gathering places for people to recount/perform lengthier oral pieces, the vestiges of which now comprise the writings in the New Testament.

2) *Capacity for remembering was extensive*. In such an oral culture, people were accustomed and trained to remember what they heard. This does not mean that people recalled verbatim what they heard. Indeed performers in some venues were expected to tell the traditions in their own distinctive way. At the same time, others, such as actors and rhetors and also some rabbis, were trained to memorize faithfully. People who had a knack for oral communication and people with “audiophonic” memories came to the fore, including non-literate peasants. Many were able to recall with unusual faithfulness lengthy compositions by hearing, even if they did not know how to read or write. In general, the capacity to recall well what one heard was an integral part of oral culture.

People remembered in part because storytellers and orators composed speech so that it would be memorable (Ong 1988:31-79). People thought about how they talked, so that what they said could be easily remembered—with proverbs and parables and words that had a ring to them and stories and teachings that were made to sound right and good and that had a great deal of repetition. Also, in an oral culture, words were memorable because they were understood to have power. When you think about traditions in the early church, many of them were performative sayings—words that had power to effect a healing or exorcise a demon or pronounce a blessing. Words were actions that had an impact meant to change people, change the way people thought or related or acted or imagined the world. Such words were memorable words.

3) *Composing was done by ear.* In an oral culture, composing is almost exclusively done with sound in mind, by oral expression or perhaps in the head, but certainly not in the process of writing. Similar to performances by modern stand-up comedians, stories and speeches were composed in speech, even lengthy ones, for the ear. Then at some point they were transcribed on a scroll, either as dictation or as an exercise in memory. The composer of Mark, for example, may have performed the Gospel of Mark orally, and then it was transcribed at some point in its performance life. The Gospel of John, with its series of lengthy scenes, may have originated the same way. The revisions and expansions that the authors of Matthew and Luke made to Mark may also be explained, in part, as oral re-compositions. The reconstructed Q may never have been written down. Paul no doubt composed his letters orally for sound and emotional effect and then dictated them to an amanuensis to be returned to orality when they were presented before an assembly of recipients (P. Botha 1992; J. Dewey 1995). The same would have been true for other letters as well. There is uncertainty and controversy about how much the work of scribes and the presence of handwritten scrolls influenced the dynamics of composition (Kelber 1983), but an ethos of orality predominated.

4) *Handwritten scrolls served orality.* In the oral cultures of the first century, writing was present but rare, and reading was limited. The leisure time, the training, and the financial resources necessary to learn how to make letter characters were available almost exclusively to the five percent plus of elites (and to their slaves and retainers who may have written or read manuscripts for them). Even some who knew how to read may not have known how to write. And some scribes probably could copy letters without knowing what they meant.

Elites used writing primarily to keep accounts for the government, promote the accomplishments of the government, and carry out business dealings (Draper 2004; Bowman and Woolf 1994; Koester 1991). Philosophers, rhetoricians, historians, playwrights, and others employed writing to preserve and distribute their work. Among elites, there may have been a manuscript culture of sorts (Robbins 1994). But for them and for all others the oral ethos predominated. In this context, handwritten scrolls almost exclusively served orality. Scrolls were a handwritten depository for oral compositions. They assisted composers in producing a script of an oral composition. They served public readers in oral presentations to an audience. They assisted performers in practicing recall in preparation for performances. They enabled the compositions-for-performance to go from one location to another, although oral compositions also circulated orally from performance to performance without the aid of scrolls. The overwhelming experience of early Christian traditions was in terms of oral performances in communal settings. Scrolls may have been present to authenticate the composer of a letter or to

be a symbol of the sender's authority. They may or may not have been consulted by the performer. They would have been indecipherable to the audience. First-century Christians would have thought of the gospels and letters not as scrolls but as performances they had heard and experienced.

5) *Scrolls were peripheral to performance.* A scroll was sometimes present when the gospel stories were told and letters were read. But it seems unlikely that they were consulted. The scrolls and the writing on them do not appear to have been structured so as to facilitate public reading. The typical features that we count on to facilitate reading were not there (Hezser 2001). On the scrolls, the letters were placed one after another without punctuation and without spaces between words. The letters were only upper case letters with no breaks to mark the beginning and ending of sentences or proper nouns or paragraphs. The size and shape of the letters were not uniform within a scroll or from scroll to scroll, as one experiences them in print. There were no accents to assist with pronunciation. Furthermore, consider the following conditions for reading: the scrolls were cumbersome and awkward to handle; it was difficult to find one's place, especially if the scroll was lengthy; and the lighting may have been quite poor depending on the location of the reading (inside) and the time of day. Furthermore, there were no desks or podia available on which to place a scroll. For reading, the scroll may have been held open on the lap or held by two people, one on either side of the reader.

Some scholars argue that these factors were not insurmountable, saying that people learned to read the handwritten continuous script and would have found ways to handle the scrolls (Shiell 2004; P. Botha 1992). Indeed, there are descriptions of people who could read with facility. No doubt some did, but it would have been rare. Just as musicians learn to read complex musical compositions with facility, so also some people would be accustomed to the conditions for reading. I think this occasionally occurred. Others think that to read with facility, in any case, one needed to pretty well have the text memorized. Given the oral society, all who could not read with facility probably depended on memory. In fact, those who were trained to read with facility would also have been specially trained to memorize with facility (J. Small 1997). Furthermore, most people struggling to read would not have been able to read with meaningful inflection and certainly not with hands free to act out the stories or express the passions of a composition with gestures or movements. Having a gospel or letter in memory would have greatly enhanced the meaningfulness and power of the presentation. Simply reading the text aloud does not do it; this merely replicates in public the act of reading aloud in private. With reading there is no immediacy, no liveliness, and no interactive relationship with the audience. The whole job of a performer was to keep the audience listening. This is what storytellers and orators in any culture do. Lively engagement was what audiences expected. Audiences may not otherwise have tolerated it.

Hence, I would argue that even so-called "readings" would have been more of a performance than a reading. And the one presenting would likely not have depended on the scroll for that performance. A performer may have consulted a scroll in order to do memory work in preparation for a performance; yet even here performers would read it aloud or have someone read it for them. Again, sound was primary and the handwritten scrolls were peripheral.

6) *Scrolls were limited in number.* Writing was done on scrolls made of papyrus reeds pressed together. The scrolls and the writing implements were expensive. As such, scrolls were

limited in the culture. Early Christianity was predominantly a movement of the peasant class and the urban poor with the presence of some elites (again, there was no middle class in ancient pre-industrial societies). Most communities probably had limited access to producing or using scrolls. The early Christians were not people of the book. There was no book yet. There were only scrolls, few and far between. This was true of writings considered scripture by the Judean people—there were few copies of the Torah and even fewer of other writings, seldom consulted directly, with mainly symbolic value as a venerated object (Hezser 2001). Some Christian communities who gathered as synagogues may have had a scroll of the Torah, but probably not. Most first-century Christian communities in the Hellenistic world would likely have had no scrolls related to the Judean scriptures or traditions. Early Christian writings did not first appear until around the mid-century, first Paul's letters and then others. Mark was written down around 70 CE, the other gospels not until the last two decades of the first century. Because Christians expected Jesus to return soon, authors did not compose nor did scribes copy to preserve for posterity. In the first century, gospels likely circulated orally with and without the aid of a scroll. Paul's letters were meant for specific communities and would not likely have been immediately copied for use elsewhere. Indeed, some were so idiosyncratic as not even to be relevant to other communities. Later letters of the first century, such as James and I Peter (and Revelation), were designed to be circulated, but they may have been presented by an oral performer going from community to community without the scrolls themselves being widely copied.

We sometimes have the image that early Christians had access to the New Testament writings as we do. The likelihood is that individual communities would have had access at most to only one or two scrolls of the early Christian movement, if any at all. In this first century, Christianity was an overwhelmingly oral movement, even when some scrolls were present.

7) *The content of the scrolls reflects performance.* Reinforcing the notion that gospels and letters were performed is an awareness that the writings themselves are geared to lively expression. The written gospels and the letters may be seen as records or scripts of/for oral performances. Dennis Dewey has likened the print in the Bible to fossil remains.<sup>1</sup> Just as a fossil is a trace record of what was once a living creature, so the New Testament writings are trace records of live performances in the first century. In this regard, the writings themselves bear witness to the dynamics of performance. That is to say, we get clues to the live performances from the written remains. For example, the gospels and letters contain language that reflects features of oral storytelling and memorable speech. In addition, the texts reflect the performer's use of voice when, for example, the text says that someone "shouted." They reflect gestures used in performance when the writings depict, say, the laying on of hands. The texts may imply facial expressions when there is irony or amazement. They also suggest movement for the performer as characters go from place to place in the story. These features may serve as stage directions for performance. They may also be in the text not so much because they give directions to the performer but because they record the manner in which the performer told the story, say by gesture or movement, in performing it. To a limited extent, then, we may be able to infer from the "fossil writings" something of what an original live performance may have been like.

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<sup>1</sup> From a conversation with Dewey in 2004 at the Network of Biblical Storytellers conference, Atlanta, GA.

8) *Not scripture*. Another very important factor supporting the primary orality of the New Testament compositions is that they were not originally conceived of as scripture. They were in the mode of storytelling and orations and public letters and wisdom (James) and prophecies (Revelation), genres to be presented orally. The letters were just that, letters orally shared with communities. And it appears as if letters bear the marks of the oral compositions of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Some narrative compositions bear the marks of drama, such as the Gospel of John and Revelation. All these compositions were initially experienced in oral venues such as houses and marketplaces and public buildings. Even if first presented in synagogue gatherings, they would have been seen as lively performances in the genre of storytelling and letters. Hence, until well into the second and even third century, these writings would not have been treated as *written* documents in the way scribes and rabbis treated some of their written traditions of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Septuagint. Hence, when we study the New Testament writings in their original first-century context, we are not studying them as scripture, but as oral compositions of a variety of genres. This insight is critical for the whole enterprise of performance criticism.

9) *Performed as a whole*. Because the early Christian compositions did not initially bear the aura associated with the Judean writings of scripture, they would not have been broken up for reading in houses of worship (a later practice of Judaism and Christianity). Rather, they would have been oral compositions expected to be heard as a whole. Besides, apart from Romans and I and II Corinthians, none of Paul's letters, even the pseudepigraphic ones, takes more than twenty to thirty minutes to present. Apart from Hebrews, the same is true for the rest of the New Testament letters. The composer of I Peter even apologizes that his letter is so brief (in time to hear, not in space to read). The Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John take less than two hours to perform, Revelation an hour and a half. That is not a significant amount of time considering the interest in the matters and the cultural experience with storytelling and theater presentations on the part of audiences. The Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles take longer, but even three or so hours is not prohibitive for a lively, engaging, and profound story. Film and theater productions (including one-person shows) of three hours in length are common today as well.

10) *First audiences*. It is worth pointing out that especially first audiences of a New Testament composition would likely have heard each performed as a whole. I cannot imagine the Galatians community gathering to hear Paul's letter for the first time and not hearing the whole letter. The same can be said for all other letters. As the emissary with Revelation went from city to city, can you imagine the performer of Revelation halting that gripping apocalypse in the middle and telling people to come back the next week to hear the rest? The same is true with Mark. When I perform only part of Mark, the overwhelming response is: Don't stop now! The drama and the suspense in Mark's story hold an audience. And what ancient community receiving a letter from any of the "apostles" would have stood for hearing only a part of it?

Besides, an analysis of the rhetoric of gospels and letters shows that each was meant to have an impact *as a whole*. The desired transformation would not occur if the audience heard it in sections. The composition would be misunderstood if an audience heard only part of it. We scholars have so fragmented our treatment of these writings that we have lost the sense of the

progressive rhetorical impact of a composition as it develops from beginning to end. The New Testament writings were meant to be presented and experienced in their entirety.

Furthermore, there would have been multiple first audiences, each time the composition was performed in a new place. It would have taken some years for each of Paul's letters to circulate widely; and they would have been experienced as a whole by each new audience. Other letters and the apocalypse that were meant to be circulated would have been presented to many communities for the first time, and thus heard as a whole. The same would be true of the Gospels. Furthermore, the same audiences hearing a gospel or letter for a second and third time more probably would also have heard it as a whole.

*Conclusion.* After about twenty centuries, we are beginning to recover something that has been lost, eclipsed from our experience—namely, the experience of telling and hearing the New Testament compositions from memory as a whole. Just as Hans Frei (1984) bemoaned the “eclipse of biblical narrative,” so we lament the related “eclipse of biblical performance.” So, is the Bible what we have in print? Or is it the stories and speeches that were performed, of which our Bible contains the remnants?

However we may configure it, the writings we have in the New Testament are examples of “performance literature,” that is, literature that was meant for performance—no less than music, no less than theater, no less than oral interpretation of literature. Can we imagine a musicologist spending years sitting in libraries looking at scores but never hearing the music performed (C. Small 1998)? Can we imagine theater critics studying scripts of ancient drama but never seeing the performance of a play? Can we imagine how we biblical scholars have studied this performance literature for centuries without hearing these writings performed orally as stories and speeches? Can we now imagine biblical scholars themselves listening to and even performing these writings? The meaning of a text comes to bear at the point where it is performed (Maclean 1988). Performers are figuring out the range of meanings for these texts and seeking to embody them. That is what we scholars are challenged to do. The act of performance is the very reason why the scripts came into existence in the first place!

### **A New Approach: Performance Criticism**

Thus there is a gap in New Testament studies. There is something missing in our study of early Christianity, namely the oral/aural events in which early Christian writings were performed before a communal audience in an oral culture. Very little research in the history of our discipline focuses on the performance event. There may be good reasons why there has been such a lacuna in New Testament studies. Such a thing as an oral performance is ethereal. It is forever gone from our experience. How can we even begin to imagine what performances may have been like for performer or audience? How can we imagine that we can use orality as a means to interpret the writings in the New Testament? Fortunately, such questions have not daunted us in the past from seeking to recover portraits of the elusive historical Jesus or from constructing the nature and dynamics of long-gone, early Christian communities. So also we can approach this challenge carefully and thoughtfully, aware of pitfalls and misdirection along the way. It will require a

reorientation of our methodologies and a good measure of pioneering efforts, but addressing this gap in New Testament studies will, I believe, be well worth the effort.

And, in fact, there are many studies now emerging to help fill this gap. It seems appropriate to designate the emerging biblical discipline as “performance criticism” (Rhoads 2006; Doan and Giles 2005; Giles and Doan 2009). Biblical performance criticism is not just one more methodology added on to other methodologies. Rather, it represents a paradigm shift in the interpretation of texts from print medium to oral medium that has implications for the entire enterprise of New Testament studies (Boomershine 1989; Loubser 2007; Fowler 2009). New methodologies and the transformation of traditional methodologies are needed to address this media shift in the biblical writings. Biblical scholars may need to retool and embrace new disciplines.

How might we formulate performance criticism? What methods might be developed that would lead to an understanding of the phenomenon of performance in early Christianity as a basis for interpreting the New Testament writings? I would like to suggest three strategies. 1) One approach is to construct in imagination performative scenarios for each writing and then study the writing as an oral performance with those scenarios in mind. 2) The second approach is to reorient traditional methods by which we study the New Testament in light of the oral dimensions of the writings. These methods will contribute to performance criticism and at the same time be transformed by the shift in medium. And new methods will be needed to address the full implications of treating the New Testament as performance literature. 3) The third approach is to do performances of these texts in our primary languages as means to get in touch with the performative dimensions of these writings in their original contexts. I will look at each of these approaches in turn, treating the first two in cursory fashion and then spending the bulk of this essay on the third approach.

### *1) Imagining Ancient Performance Events*

I am focusing here primarily on public performances of an entire gospel or letter for gathered groups, rather than on informal storytelling of brief traditions. The performance event includes the oral/written composition, the act of performing, the performer, the audience, the location, the cultural/historical circumstances, and the rhetorical impact on the audience. To construct such performance events, we need to investigate ancient art and literature for depictions and descriptions of ancient performances done by artists and rhetoricians and storytellers and dramatists. We need to look at each writing to discover clues in the writing itself as to how such performances may have been enacted (Shiner 2003; Shiell 2004). The question is: how do these factors add to or limit the range of possible meanings and the possible rhetorical impacts of the New Testament compositions in their own time?

The Oral/Written Composition. The composition will reflect style typical of communication in an oral culture. It will have certain content and order designed to be engaging and transformative to a listening audience. It will have memorable and powerful language. The sounds themselves will contribute to the meaning and impact of the composition. A composition may contain implicit stage directions for the performer.

The Act of Performing. The event of a performance 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 a stage-area, as well as the sheer force of the bodily presence of the performer to evoke emotions and commitments. Based on what we know of various kinds of ancient performances, we need to imagine the stories and letter-speeches as being expressive and emotional, filled with drama in voice and gesture and physical movement. As such, a performance is much more than aural hearing; it is an embodiment.

The Performer. The performer bears the potential meanings and impacts of the story upon the audience in a particular context. In the performance of a narrative, the performer is acting out the characters and events of the story. In the performance of a letter, the performer is personifying the dynamics of the argument that is being presented. The early Christians had no unembodied experiences of the stories or letters. Important was the authority of the performer with the audience, the personal integrity of the performer in relation to the material presented, and the performer's social location.

The Audience. The audience was collective, and the emotional and ideological responses to a performance were communal. The audiences of gospels and letters were likely quite involved in the performance with verbal and emotional reactions throughout (Shiner 2003 and 2009). Furthermore, the experience of a performance created and shaped community. Social location was a key factor in the responses of ancient audiences. What might different audiences have looked like? Mostly peasants with some or no elites? All women or all men or a mixture of both? All Gentiles or both Judeans and Gentiles? Some letters reveal the likely makeup of the recipient audience. The gospels were probably performed many times before very different audiences. We need to imagine possible audiences for performances of each of the writings. And we need to consider how a performer might have adapted a performance in light of the make-up of different audiences.

The Location. Contexts raise expectations of what does and does not happen in a particular place. As such, different places foster or inhibit certain audience responses. Ancient settings for performance included a village marketplace, an ancient theater, a house, synagogues, public forums, open spaces between villages. What does venue contribute to the meaning and impact of a performance?

The Sociohistorical Circumstances. We need to imagine different audiences hearing a composition-in-performance under divergent circumstance—persecution, conflict, oppression, war, social unrest, poverty, prosperity, and so on. Imagining specific sociohistorical circumstances in the context of an imagined performance event transforms our understanding of “reception.” To do so is to speak in fresh ways about a “politics of performance” (Ward 1987). For example, how might different factions in an audience react to a letter and to each other as a result of the reception of a letter?

Rhetorical Effect/Impact. The final factor in the dynamics of the performance event is the potential rhetorical impacts upon an audience. By rhetoric, I mean the potential impacts of the entire composition-as-performance on an audience—subversion of cultural values, transformation of worldview, impulse to action, change of behavior, emotional catharsis, ethical commitment, intellectual insight, change of political perspective, reformation of community, or

the generation of a new world. Of course, there will not be just one audience reaction to a performance. What response the composition implies may be different from what actually may have occurred. Again, social location would be crucial to audience reaction.

From these elements of the performance event, we can develop distinct “audience scenarios” as a basis for interpreting each writing in the New Testament. The question for performance criticism is this: how can we find ways to analyze all these elements of the performance event together so as to transform the ways we interpret the written texts as oral performances?

## *2) Reorienting New Testament Methods*

The second approach of performance criticism is to reorient our methods of study in light of the oral nature of the culture and oral dynamics of the texts of the New Testament. As we have said, recognizing the orality of the New Testament writings is a paradigm shift; in principle, it impacts all methods. The key to this reorientation is to focus on the performative event as a context to reconceptualize other methodologies.

In a sense, as we have said, performance criticism is not just one more criticism added to others. Rather, because the shift to performance is a shift in medium, it affects virtually all disciplines, traditional as well as recent. At the same time, performance criticism is multifaceted; that is, many disciplines can contribute to the study of performance. In turn, these same disciplines are themselves impacted and changed by the study of the New Testament in a different medium. What follows is a thumbnail sketch of many disciplines that can contribute to and are impacted by performance criticism.

### *Traditional Historical-Critical Methods*

Historical criticism. Historical criticism can contribute to performance criticism by investigating what we can know about diverse performers (rhapsodes, rhetors, storytellers, rabbinic tradents, orators, and so on), performances, venues for performances, and audiences (Scobie 1997; Hargis 1970; Hearon 2009; Wire 2002). In turn, historical criticism can be renewed by seeing the oral ethos of first-century cultures as an integral dimension of the entire enterprise of historical reconstruction.

Textual criticism. Scholars are rethinking textual criticism by explaining the fluidity of the earliest manuscript traditions in light of the fluidity of oral performances and by attending to the role of “memory variants” by scribes (Parker 1997; Carr 2005; Person 1998). Textual critics can also take greater account of the dimensions of sound in assessing the “manuscript” tradition.

Source criticism. Scholars are now rethinking the “literary” solutions to the synoptic problem by taking into account multiple oral origins for the sayings of Jesus, the development of traditions as oral recompositions, and the force of oral speech as a factor in recollection. And the idea that the gospels may have been performed orally in their entirety changes significantly our assessment of the impact of orality on the gospel traditions.

Form and genre criticism. These disciplines can be reoriented from print analysis to ask how forms and genres such as parable, gospel, apocalypse, epistle, wisdom tradition, and ethical

exhortation function to raise, subvert, and confirm expectations in the temporal medium of oral performance.

### *Recently Developed Methods*

Rhetorical criticism. Scholars think many New Testament letters were oral compositions shaped by the canons of ancient rhetoric, but they are only beginning to deal with the oral dimensions of the letters as speeches.

Narrative criticism. Scholars are beginning to reassess the oral dynamics of ancient narrative so as to replace the implied author and the implied reader with the idea of an actual performer and an actual audience in an ancient performance event. A similar reorientation transforms individual reader-response criticism to communal audience-response criticism.

Discourse analysis. This discipline seeks to show the order and flow of a composition by identifying such linguistic features as chiasmic patterns, chain sentences, parallelism, word order, foregrounding and backgrounding, emphasis, elision, transitions, verbal threads, onomatopoeia, hook words, mnemonic devices, and many forms of repetition (Davis 1999; Harvey 1988). Recently, practitioners have begun to inquire about the sound of these features. We can also reflect on the impact of sound itself upon a hearer, such as we find in the use of guttural sounds, alliteration, assonance, and other phonic repetition (Dean 1996; Lee and Scott 2009).

Orality criticism. This discipline seeks to apply knowledge gained from the study of many cultures as means to assess the orality of the New Testament period. Orality critics seek to understand the ethos of orality, the impact of writing in different cultures, the nature of performance, the responsibilities and practices of tradents, the dynamics of social memory, the power dimensions of oral/written communication, and the gender dimensions of orality. This criticism is obviously foundational to performance criticism.

Ideological criticism. These multiple approaches (feminist, womanist, liberation, postcolonial, among others) can make explicit the power dynamics of relationships in oral cultures, especially in relation to performance events, by revealing whose interests in an audience are served by the composition and whose interests are violated, denigrated, and neglected (A. Dewey 2009).

### *New Methods in Biblical Studies*

Speech-act theory. This approach works well with the biblical understanding that words are actions that generate and change reality (Briggs 2001).

Theater studies and performance studies. New Testament research has much to learn about the drama of the biblical narratives (Levy 2004; Brandt 2004) and about performative dynamics of the New Testament texts.

The art and practice of translation. This is also a fruitful area for reorientation as scholars translate from orality to orality, seeking to discern the original oral dimensions of the biblical writings and to preserve them in dynamic translations for performance in contemporary oral cultures (Maxey 2009).

Performance criticism may be seen as a discipline in its own right because of its focus on the event of performance. At the same time, performance criticism also incorporates traditional and recent disciplines in its endeavor to understand fully the dynamics of oral performance.

### *3) Performing as a Research Method of Interpretation*

In recent decades people have been performing biblical selections, including whole gospels, letters, and Revelation. And many of us have been teaching our students to learn and perform stories and other traditions from the Bible. These experiences have been an important part of our efforts to interpret the New Testament writings in their ancient contexts. As a biblical scholar, the experience of translating, memorizing, and performing a biblical text has become my own foundational method of research into the meaning and rhetoric of New Testament writings in their original first-century context. Here is the point: if we are making a medium shift to orality, why not study the New Testament compositions in the medium in which they originated? Does it not make sense to study the New Testament texts in the oral medium in which they were composed and first experienced? Does it not seem appropriate to experience performance literature as performances? Might that not get us in touch with dynamics of these oral compositions that otherwise might be lost or distorted? Whitney Shiner has remarked that “to understand performances and performers, one has to perform.”<sup>2</sup> I would propose, therefore, that we explore acts of performing as a methodological tool for interpreting New Testament writings in their ancient context.

Let me be clear. We can never recover a first-century performative event. We can seek to construct scenarios and imagine dynamics of first-century performance, but we can never know what a performance might have been like. Based on historical investigation, we can know a lot about how they might have been done, but in fact they are lost to us. However, if the goal of interpretation is to understand a New Testament writing in its ancient context, contemporary performing can perhaps open us exegetes to dynamics of the text that we might otherwise ignore or misunderstand. What have we been missing by studying them solely in the medium as print? What might we learn from experiencing them in an oral medium? Both hearing and performing are new media for biblical scholarship. *Hearing* the New Testament places the interpreter in a different medium relationship with the text from the traditional print medium. *Performing* the text goes further, enabling the interpreter to become the “voice” and “embodiment” of the narrative or letter.

Hence, I propose that we can experiment with twenty-first-century performances as a way to explore the first-century performance event. Here are some reasons to employ performance as a tool of research.

- Performance may help us to investigate the range of meaning potential for a given composition.
- Performance may help us to explore the potential rhetorical impacts upon ancient audiences.

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<sup>2</sup> Cited from a private conversation.

- Performance may help us to recover oral features of the text and performance dynamics to which we might not otherwise have access.

- Performance may help us to restore the emotive dimensions to the text.

The remainder of this article is devoted to an in-depth exploration of ways in which performing the New Testament compositions may help in our understanding of these documents in the context of the first century.

### **Performance as a Method of Research**

For thirty years I have been translating, memorizing, and performing different New Testament writings, first the Gospel of Mark, then Galatians, Philemon, the Sermon on the Mount, selections from Luke, scenes from John, and, more recently, James, 1 Peter, and Revelation. These experiences have been an important part of my hermeneutical efforts to interpret the New Testament writings. As a scholar, I have found that performing a New Testament composition is a very different experience from reading it silently and leads to distinctive ways of understanding this literature (Roloff 1973; Pelias 1992; Lee and Galati 1977; Issacharoff and Jones 1988).

As I have argued, the New Testament texts compare to drama and music as performance pieces. Performance is integral to interpretation in fields of both drama and music. So also in New Testament studies, interpretation takes place at the site of performance, both for the performer and for the audience (Maclean 1988). This performance approach involves a major shift in our traditional methodologies of studying these writings. We need new methods to assist with interpretation in the role of being an audience and in the role of being a performer.

First, the exegete can interpret from the position of being part of an audience. Taking on the role of an audience and taking in the experience of a performance can be an integral part of the process of interpretation. Many biblical scholars have told me that their experience of hearing a performance of Galatians or Revelation or 1 Peter has fundamentally changed their way of thinking about this literature. I myself have learned much about 1 Thessalonians and Philippians as letters of Paul by hearing my students perform them.

As such, experiencing a New Testament writing as a performance provides a significantly fresh medium through which to encounter the text and to address interpretive issues. Exegetes have likely never heard all of James or 1 Peter or Revelation on one occasion as a way to understand the rhetorical impact of those writings. When hearing the text, the critic cannot stop and reflect and look back, as one can do when reading. The story keeps moving, and one gets caught up in it and carried forward by it. The critic can take it all in and decide whether it makes sense or whether one or another thing could or should have been translated or performed a different way. In these ways, exegetes-as-audience can work to expand the range (in some cases) and to narrow the range (in other cases) of plausible interpretations of meaning and rhetoric.

To learn how to be an audience, exegetes will need to develop new methods. We 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 narrative, suspending judgment, and then

afterward evaluating performances critically and constructively (Pelias 1992). The experience of multiple performances of the same text will prevent one from judging the value of this procedure based on one performance only. For example, it would be interesting to hear the Gospel of Mark performed as a narrative that ultimately rejects the disciples and then as a narrative that ultimately accepts the disciples—and then assess the audience responses.

Second, the exegete can interpret by taking on the role of a performer. In music and drama, we do not usually think that the exegete/critic will be the performing artist. The role of the exegete is seen as recipient, as one who sees and hears as a means to interpret and assess. The role of performer is reserved for the artist. But what if we take this model a step further? What if we combine the two roles, so that the exegete learns not only from hearing/seeing a performance but also from the act of performing? Performing the text transforms the way of relating to the text. 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. By combining the two roles of critic and performer, both the process of interpreting and the tests of interpretation are explored and worked out in artistic acts of performing.

The act of performing can be an integral part of the process of interpretation. Again, the exegete will need to learn new tools and methods. In order to perform, the interpreter/performer must make judgments about the potential meanings and the possible rhetorical impacts of a New Testament composition—taking on the roles of the characters, moving in imagination from place to place, interacting between one character and another, recounting the narrative world from the narrator’s perspective and standards of judgment, and so on. 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. If the goal of interpretation is to understand a New Testament writing in its ancient context, contemporary performing can open us exegetes to fresh dynamics of the text that will have an impact on our interpretations.

### **The Performer as Artist**

Scholars have recently come to appreciate the aesthetic expression of the gospels as narratives and the logical force of the letters as rhetorical arguments. In commenting on the New Testament as documents, scholars have noted the straightforward but sophisticated storytelling in Mark, the powerful means that Luke uses to weave episodes and parables, the way in which a letter of Paul, even such a brief one as Philemon, may be a rhetorical tour de force, and how vivid is the imagery in Revelation. Now we need to appreciate also the artistry of the New Testament writings through experiencing them in performance. In so doing, we move the medium to orality and deal with these very same words as oral compositions. Seeing the aesthetics of a text *as* oral performance has to do with what anthropologists refer to as “verbal arts”—the arts of language that serve the effectiveness of oral expression and its impact.

In this essay, we are looking at verbal arts in terms of the way a composition is presented orally. The *language* in orality is itself an expression of verbal arts, but the *manner of presenting* the language is also an expression of verbal art in performance (Baumann 1977 and 1986). We need to appreciate the ways in which skilled performers can bring the performance features of these writings to life, and we need to appreciate the benefits of such performing arts in the service of interpretation.

The performer is viewed as an artist. That was certainly true of the performers and orators of the ancient world. Storytellers were popular, especially among the lower classes, and often renowned because of their skill at engaging and holding an audience. Rhapsodes were well-regarded among elites as orators who gave performances of Homer and other poetry. They were hired to entertain at banquets and festivals. Such performers were judged at competitions as part of the Olympian Games. Theater too was highly popular as an art form. Orators of rhetoric were well-known. Large crowds gathered to hear outstanding orators at funerals and in the courtroom and in public forums. The ancient world valued performance at the popular and at the elite levels alike. There is every reason to think that performances of the New Testament compositions in the early church would have been treated in similar ways—not as scripture readings of short passages in worship but as storytelling and poetic-like performances and orations.

Today, the performer is also an artist, and the performance is an artistic expression (Bozarth 1997), even if, as in my case, the performer is clearly not trained. If we are speaking of performance art, we are talking about such matters as stage presence, the knack for entertaining and engaging an audience, a skilled use of voice, the capacity to bring different characters to life, the art of conveying irony and humor, the enlivening use of body language, the means to evoke emotions, the ability to project suspense and develop a plot, and so on. The craft of performance involves being authentic and convincing, being natural in a way that does not draw attention to oneself, bringing alive the story and the rhetoric without distraction, heightening the senses and the imagination (Pelias 1992:18). All these represent the means for a performer to enthrall and move an audience, to transport them into another world and, potentially, to work a transformation. In this aesthetic model, both performer and audience-as-critics are interpreters of contemporary renditions and the faithfulness of their presentations. The artist interprets by performing, and the critic interprets by reception and commentary on the performance.

Hence, for the exegete-as-performer the act of performing is not simply an end in itself. The performer gets in touch with the artistic dynamics of performing and becomes familiar with the verbal arts of performing. To be sure, this is an indirect relationship with the performances of the New Testament compositions in antiquity. Nevertheless, the advancement comes with the fact that we are interpreting them in the same oral medium in which they were originally composed and first experienced.

As such, the whole process of translation, memorization (or composing/revising in performance), preparation, performance, interaction with audiences, and post-performance reflection are methods of exploring the meaning and rhetoric of the text. Just as some New Testament scholars have learned and adapted the disciplines of narrative analysis and rhetorical analysis and cultural anthropology, so now some scholars can be engaged in learning and training in oral interpretation of literature and performance studies. These become critical methods for analyzing texts (Pelias 1992:39).

Certainly not all scholars will be engaged in performing, but a critical mass can bring this approach into vital dialogue within biblical studies ([www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org](http://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org)). And it may not be as daunting to engage in performing as it may seem at first blush. Many of my students memorize and perform much more easily than they had thought possible. The more I learn and memorize, the easier it becomes. In this sense, all scholars and students can appreciate the approach by learning and telling a few brief stories to test interpretations or by becoming a sophisticated audience for performances. Others can be more ambitious and learn whole texts. Reading the text aloud does not engage an audience. To experience the text in the medium of a performer, it is necessary to learn a composition by memory and tell it to others—over and over.

### **The Performer's Approach**

The contemporary performer of these ancient scripts has to make some basic decisions about her or his approach. In general, the performer needs to distinguish between then and now. This involves several key choices.

One choice has to do with language, to perform either in Greek or in one's contemporary native language. I think it is very important to hear and do performances in Greek. Some biblical scholars today know how to speak and listen to ancient Greek well enough to understand the language in the oral medium and appreciate the oral impact of the verbal arts and the sound of Greek. I think we need greater training for the future exploration of performance criticism.

I prefer to perform in my own language, English, because it places me in an actual performance event with an audience. I find it most helpful to do my own translations and then to refine them through performance. I have followed this procedure, for example, with the Gospel of Mark, the Sermon on the Mount, and scenes from John, Philemon, and James. In some cases I have adapted for performance the translations of others, for example, Hans Dieter Betz's translation of Galatians (1979) and George Caird's rendition of Revelation (1966). In translating, I have sought to retain aspects of the verbal art of the composition. Through translating for performance, I have become sensitive to the effectiveness of word choice, word order, repetition, the sounds of words, the length of words and sentences, additions and omissions, and many other aspects of the communication event. I am unaware of any translations of the New Testament currently available that reflect the orality of the first century or that are specifically designed for oral performance (Maxey 2009).

The performer also needs to decide whether to do an abbreviated version of the writing, as some performers of biblical texts do, or to perform the entire piece. Apart from performances of the Sermon on the Mount, selections on wealth and poverty from Luke, and stories from John, I have chosen to do entire texts. Mark takes almost two and one-half hours with a break. Revelation takes about an hour and forty-five minutes without a break. Others that I perform—Galatians, James, and 1 Peter—take about thirty minutes. Philemon is quite brief. The performance of any smaller rhetorical unit can be helpful, along with abbreviated versions. However, I myself do not find it possible to understand or convey the full meaning or the overall rhetorical impact of a text without performing it in its entirety. Besides, as I have argued,

performing them in their entirety is the original manner in which they were experienced by the earliest Christian communities.

The performer also needs to decide whether to do a text-based performance (absolute memory) or a fluid performance in which one composes and recomposes in performance. Fluid compositions are important to give us a sense of how some ancient tellers composed as they performed and performed. Based on studies of ancient manuscripts and contemporary oral cultures, scholars think most performers were creative in their own right and recomposed (at least to some extent) by putting their individual stamp on the performance and in response to the situation and the audience (Foley 1995 and 2002). Some think that the performers of Paul's letters would have expanded on various points as they presented. However, we also have reason to think that actors of ancient drama, some rhapsodes, and some bearers of rabbinic traditions stayed quite close in memory to a script (Pelias 1992:31). I prefer to do memorized performances, although I am aware of making mistakes in memory and making some minor adaptations based on audience and context. I prefer memorization because each of the New Testament writings is the closest thing we have to an actual composition of at least one occasion of an ancient performance, and I am eager to use contemporary performance as a way to understand the biblical composition in its ancient context.

Also, the interpreter/performer must choose either to seek to replicate the style of an ancient performance or to express a contemporary style of performance—at the same time seeking to do so in the service of being faithful to the composition. As I have suggested, there is no way to replicate an ancient performance, although there are some indications of the style in which these presentations may have been carried out and some information about conventional gestures that may have accompanied certain expressions. There is good reason to believe the performances were lively and emotional and interactive with the audience (Shiner 2003:143-91).

In any case, I prefer to work with a contemporary style of performing for a contemporary audience. I think of this practice as being faithful to the original performances in this way: as the original performances were in the style of the populace, so we can do presentations in the popular style of performance today. I proceed in this way because it gives real-time experiences of a performance event as a performer trying to engage and move an audience and as a performer in interaction with an audience that can understand, participate, and react. From such contemporary performing, we can learn much about ancient performances—in part because performances in general, ancient and modern, share many dynamics in common.

These are my preferences, but I am convinced that we need to experience different styles of performance and diverse interpretations—with various audiences, material settings, and social locations. In what follows, I will share some dynamics of performing that I have found helpful in an effort to comprehend the meaning and rhetoric of New Testament writings—presenting the whole world of the text, altered states of consciousness, acting out the “script,” personification of characters, onstage/offstage focus, nonverbal communication, emotions, humor, temporal experience, and rhetoric.

### The World of the Composition in Imagination

The very acts of memorizing and performing enable the exegete to know the text in detail and to know it thoroughly. When you memorize, it is not easy to screen out details or to consider them inconsequential. When you perform a composition many times, different details come to the fore. I have performed the Gospel of Mark more than three hundred times, and I become aware of new dimensions of the story almost every time I perform. Also, by knowing the whole text, the performer knows not only everything that is in the text but also what is *not* in the text. As such, there is a clear sense when interpreting Mark not to consider what might be in other Gospels or when interpreting Galatians not to consider what might be in other letters of Paul. Such a thorough grasp of the text leads the performer to decide anew what in the text might be emphasized with each performance.

However, the real benefit to memorization and performance is not a matter of knowing details, but of experiencing the world of the narrative or letter *as a whole*. When I learn a narrative, I am eager to get “inside” this world. I set out my translations as a short story or speech, without the fragmentation of chapters and verses. After I learn the words, can recount them with facility, and am able to act them out, some significant shifts occur. The first shift is that I am no longer thinking about words as I see them on the page. Rather, I hear the sounds of the words as I anticipate them in my head. The text is off the page and into the world of sound. Then, the next shift is that I am no longer thinking of the sounds of the words. Rather, I am imagining the scene I am recounting, and I am telling you what I am “seeing.” The story or letter becomes three-dimensional. It is the difference between seeing something on a flat surface and viewing a hologram. This is the breakthrough that enables the performer to live “inside the world of the story” in imagination.

But the experience in performance of the entire composition goes even further. Traditionally, we have tended toward a fragmented approach to a narrative or letter, thinking in terms of individual episodes or portions of a letter. A performance of the whole composition opens out into a world that compares to the world of a film or the experience of a theater production, which creates a holistic world that is not simply a sequence of events but an entire story with beginning, middle, and end. The whole story or letter is a world. Movie-goers and theater-goers speak of being drawn into the world of a film or of a dramatic performance. Readers of novels talk about getting lost in the world of the story. In this case of performing, however, a performer is even more involved than a viewer. As a performer, I imagine the world from the perspective of the narrator/speaker, and I myself am part of that world. Even when, as the overall narrator, I am not a character in the story, I am nevertheless a participant in the performance.

As such, the act of memorizing the whole text and performing it enlivens the imagination of the exegete to be aware of the “story world” or “letter world” created by the composition. Narrative criticism has taught us about the narrative world of the text. The references in the story do not in the first instance refer to historical events but to the story world—character, events, settings as depicted in the story. The narrator has distinct ideological takes on this world. Each letter and the apocalypse also has a distinctive narrative world.

This world becomes even more distinctive in performance. The performer brings the story to life on the “staging area” as characters, places, and events are portrayed for the imagination of the audience. The exegete becomes immersed in this world of a gospel or of a letter, imagining its characters and settings, experiencing events as a movement in time, with its past and future, its cosmology of space and time, its cultural dynamics, and its sociopolitical realities—all from the standards and beliefs of the narrator’s perspective. When I perform the whole text, the entire narrative world of a gospel or a letter comes to have an integrity of its own, again, much as one experiences the world of a film or drama.

To imagine the world of the narrative, the exegete-performer uses all the tools of the New Testament trade to inform her or his imagination—geography, archaeology, studies of daily life, historical information, and cultural anthropology. Of course, there are many ways to imagine the world of a story. The point I am making, however, is that in the process of performing I discern coherence in the levels of a gospel or a letter that I would not otherwise have seen (and also become aware of gaps and breaks in the story-line). Entering this world is like walking through an imaginary door (on stage, so to speak) into a different reality or imaginatively crossing a border into another culture. I never cease being who I am as a person, even as I take on this role of performer, but the performance enables me to grasp and imagine this world more clearly as a whole.

I cannot emphasize enough how much this experience of the world of the text has changed my approach to interpretation. This experience of the narrative world as an integrated whole provides the frame for the interpretation of specific parts of a story or letter. Every specific thing is interpreted in relation to everything else and the whole in time. By such an immersion into the text and its sequence of events and its pattern of argumentation, the performer interprets each sequential line in the context of the gradual unfolding of the composition as a whole. The characters are all evaluated according to values embedded in the narrative. The actions and events are possible within the parameters allowed by the cosmology. The settings provide the conditions for conflicts. The flow of the narrative as movement in time becomes clearer—just what the hearers know and when they learn it. And so on.

### **World and Audience**

Performing a whole story makes it absolutely clear to the performer-exegete that the text is a rhetorical act of communication designed to change/transform an audience. In performing, the exegete becomes acutely conscious that every performance of every line in sequence is a speech-act designed to have a rhetorical impact. There is no escaping the choices one needs to make both to understand and to present the story/letter to an audience. In so doing, the performer is both inside this world and outside of it, interacting with the audience. The performer wants the audience to see what the performer sees and experience what the performer shows. The performer seeks to engage the audience, present the world of the composition, draw the audience into that world and lead them through it, persuade the audience to overcome its resistance to the narrator’s way of seeing the world, and thereby lead the audience to embrace the values of the

performer/composition and accept the composition's way of seeing the world. The performer does not just tell about a world; rather the performance *is* a world.

There are two dynamics to this interaction between performance and audience. One dynamic is that the audience experiences their own real world reflected in the composition. Orality critics tell us that memory works when the audience of a performance interprets the narrative or epistolary world of the composition within the political, social, and religious structures and traditions with which they are already enculturated. Richard Horsley (2001) has argued, for example, that the Gospel of Mark is presented from a peasant perspective and to a peasant audience in such a way that they will hear the Gospel within the frames of the "little traditions" of Israel that inform their world. Obviously, this synchronicity in framework between composition and audience has to be true to a significant extent or the composition will not make sense.

Yet there is another dynamic at work in performing these writings of the New Testament. These compositions were also seeking to present a new world, a world that could not be adequately understood within the contemporary traditions of the audience. The compositions are pushing audiences to new and different understandings of their world. The writings are virtually apocalyptic in their efforts to accomplish this goal, because the composers believed a *new* kingdom or a *new* creation had dawned in their midst. In fact, it has seemed to me at times that the rhetorical function of some writings like Mark or Galatians or Revelation was to enculturate the audience into a new way of being in the world. For example, Mark has Jesus announce that "the empire of *God* has arrived" (Mark 1:15) and then proceeds to display this world in the healings and exorcisms that follow. The Markan Jesus even warns people not to "put new wine into old wineskins" (Mark 2:22). Matthew claims that a scribe of the kingdom brings out of his treasure both "what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13:51), and his gospel has this thematic ring of connection to the past and the dawning of something new. Also, Paul announces in Galatians that God has acted in Jesus to "snatch us out of this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4) and that the only thing that really matters is their participation in "new creation" (Galatians 6:15). The rhetorical force of his letter seems to be accomplishing the replication of that very act.

The composition-in-performance of many New Testament writings, therefore, functions almost with an apocalyptic force that means to lead the audience to end their previous way of being in the world and to enter a new way of seeing and being in the world—beliefs and ethical standards and relationships and hopes and new realities. In some sense, one can be in touch with this dynamic through the act of performing to contemporary audiences, even when contemporary audiences would not be aware of it. Although the cultural frames of contemporary audiences are vastly different from those of ancient audiences, a performer can still sometimes sense where the composer seems to be taking something for granted with the audience and where the composer is seeking to subvert and change the cultural assumptions of an audience.

### **Altered States of Consciousness**

There is another feature at play in performing the world of the story or letter. Anthropologists of theater regularly point out that the experience of a play places an audience in

a liminal space, a space in which our ordinary world of daily life is somehow suspended while we enter the world of the drama being played out before us (Turner 1969). The audience is drawn into the suspension of disbelief and invited to entertain the world being acted out before them. This world may be similar to their world or it may be quite fantastic. In either case, there is a temporary loss of immediate awareness of one's own world and the absorption into another time and place. This altered state of consciousness may occur when one is reading a novel or short story. Unfortunately, because we do not read most biblical writings in their entirety, this experience seldom happens for us. However, performance shifts the understanding of a composition from the knowledge conveyed by the composition to an "experience" of it. Hence, when the biblical materials are put to performance, the possibility of experiencing an altered state of consciousness becomes more likely.

Here is the point. People are changed and transformed by encountering and entering an imaginary world. Many people will talk about the stories that have transformed them or about the "movie that changed my life." People talk about being changed by visiting or living in another culture. When we experience a different world, our views of things may change, our values may be shifted, our emotions may be transformed, our relationships may be altered, and we may be empowered to live different lives. We enter a world, are changed by the experience, and then emerge to be different people or—as in the case of the New Testament writings—to be different communities. Our research into the meaning and rhetoric of the New Testament writings may take a new turn if we can come to understand this performance dynamic and how it led people to embrace and be loyal to fresh, alternative ways of living.

Yet there is more to the idea of altered states of consciousness. On occasion, I as a performer have gone into a kind of "zone" in the telling. I invest myself so much in a gospel or letter that I get "lost in the performing." Even beyond engaging another world, I attain a kind of oneness with the telling and a oneness with the audience. At times, I have had people tell me that they were mesmerized by a performance at various points or that they were caught up in a way that transcended their ordinary experience. On occasion, people tell me that you could have heard a pin drop and that the audience was rapt by the story. I have had a few people tell me that they made some life-changing decisions as a result of their encounter with a biblical work in performance. I attribute these experiences to the nature of the composition I am telling and to the dynamics of performance, not to my capacity as a performer. In light of these experiences, I am convinced that performance events lend themselves to evoking altered states of consciousness (Pelias 1992:18).

These quite limited reflections on the mystical-like experiences of performers and audiences have led me to reflect on descriptions of some audience responses to speeches in the New Testament—the speaking in tongues/baptism in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in response to Peter's preaching (Acts 2:37-47) or Paul's description of people experiencing the Spirit in response to his proclamation (Galatians 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10) or John's expectation that hearers of his story will move from death into "life." In these examples, the altered states of consciousness were communal experiences. In the ancient world, altered experiences were rarely individualistic. In my experiences, many modern audiences, particularly European-American audiences, tend to respond silently and privately, even as individuals within the audience. Sometimes an audience responds collectively with laughter, or some people may weep at a

particularly poignant scene. People may indeed be transformed, but more likely in a personal way.

By contrast, ancient audiences would have been much more communal and vocal in their responses in a performance event. Whitney Shiner has shown the involvement of ancient audiences in performances (2003:143-90). They participated actively in the event throughout. Utter amazement at hearing the story about the healing of a blind man, or wails at seeing Jesus' last moments depicted before them, or joy and surprise at the narrative of Jesus' appearance from the grave—these responses may have spread through an audience like wildfire in a way that caught the whole group up in a transformative experience. These reactions would have been especially likely when the performance was closely related to the audience's own life world.

The study of performance events as altered states of consciousness may help us to explain better how Christianity came to be such a powerful force that spread so rapidly in the ancient world and captivated people's allegiance even in the face of persecution. Reading the New Testament in print may bring such experiences to our attention, but performance can bring them to life.

### **Acting Out the Composition as “Script”**

As I have experienced it, the role of the performer is not merely to memorize and repeat the text. The performer acts it out. It is important to note that the contrast between reading a text in private and performing it in public is more than the difference between written and oral communication. It is not as if the audience has sound alone as a basis for interpretation, as if one were listening to a tape recording. A performance is *embodied* in the performer and the audience. The performer is present in body with voice, sounds, movements, gestures, proximity, appearance, and context. The audience is present and experiencing all of these dimensions along with the reactions of others in the audience. Performance is word-become-flesh in an event of embodied immediacy (Bozarth 1997).

To do a faithful interpretation, the performer needs to bring out or fill in what is missing in the composition as a written “transcription” of the oral performance. She or he needs to add sounds, gestures, facial expressions, glances, pace, pauses, pitch, volume, movement, posture, body language, proximity to audience, and so on. As mentioned earlier, the text may be seen as the fossil remains of a living performance. Scientists infer from a fossil what the living creature looked like. Similarly, we can infer from the transcription something of what the living performance may have been like. Our knowledge here is limited. However, there is some evidence from descriptions of storytellers, and there are guidelines in rhetorical handbooks indicating that stories such as we encounter in the gospels and orations such as we experience in the letters were animated and emotional. In doing a contemporary-style performance, while eager to be animated and engaging, we are not trying to replicate ancient performances, but rather to get in touch indirectly with the dynamics of orality. In order to succeed in this effort, we need to see the text as a “script” for performance. In some cases, the directions for these elements of performance are explicit in the text. In some cases, they are implied by the text. In other cases,

the performer has to supply what the performer thinks will make the best sense of the text in context.

Trained storyteller Pam Faro has pointed out that just as punctuation needs to be supplied to a Greek manuscript and vowels need to be provided for a Hebrew manuscript as a basis for determining interpretation,<sup>3</sup> so in similar manner the performer needs to supply what performance dimensions are suggested or absent from the written transcription. To make this point, we note the title of an article by Bobby Loubser, “How Do You Report What Was Said with a Smile—Can We Overcome the Loss of Meaning When Oral-Manuscripts are Represented in Modern Print Media?” (2004). The performer seeks to restore what is missing from the written script we have before us, which can be a significant amount. Consider the oft-quoted statistic from various studies claiming that communication is 80% body language, 10% tone, and 10% content—although, of course, these studies were based on ordinary language in a print culture.

As noted earlier, my first step in working with a text is to do the memorization, to get the words down. This is simply a matter of rote memory work that involves seemingly endless repetition of one line after another. Often I will practice such memory work by repeating the text as quickly as I am able to speak. This way, I get control over the words so that they flow easily. Once I have learned the words well, I can begin the process of exploring the text—playing, testing, choosing, presenting, changing the pace and tempo, trying out gestures, moving around, working with inflection and timing, experimenting with pitch and volume, listening for sound and silence—all as means to explore the potential meaning and impact of the text (Pelias 1992). In this process I begin to engage my whole psychosomatic self in the embodiment of the text, not only to *tell* the story or *speak out* the letter but also to *show* the story or the letter to an audience.

Note that this practice is a reversal of the ancient process. For the most part, early tellers composed and performed orally and then the text as transcription was put in writing. By an inverse process, the contemporary performer is seeking to recover the performance by starting with the transcription. To be sure, I am a contemporary performer with another language and style of performing. In this reverse process, I am looking for all kinds of clues in the text itself about how I can faithfully bring the fossil text to life.

As I have indicated, the text itself is like a script that offers possible “stage directions” for voice, movement, body language, and emotions. As the story is told, directions for performance are suggested. These “suggestions” occur in virtually every episode of the gospel stories and are present everywhere in the letters and Revelation. Here are a very few representative examples:

“He cried in a loud cry . . .” (voice volume of what follows)

“They were astonished . . .” (tone, facial expression)

“He sighed deeply in his spirit . . .” (sound, body posture)

“He stretched out his hand and touched him . . .” (gesture, pace)

“He withdrew with his disciples to the sea” (movement)

“He looked up to heaven . . .” (head gesture, facial expression)

“ . . . gave to me and to Barnabas the right hand of partnership” (hand gesture)

“The sixth angel poured his bowl over . . .” (gesture, emotional expression)

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<sup>3</sup> From a conversation with Faro in 2004 at the Network of Biblical Storytellers conference, Atlanta, GA.

“ . . . and in his mouth it tasted bitter” (facial movement and expression)

No stage direction is carried out in a wooden or mechanical way. It must be a natural part of the performance, not something simply illustrative or added on. These aspects are part of the composition-in-performance. The performer makes judgments about how they can be expressed—sometimes in obvious and at other times in merely suggestive ways.

The composition also implies other performance features by virtue of grammar, syntax, word order, position of subordinate clauses, various forms of parallelism, length of sentences, choices of words, and devices of discourse, such as irony and innuendo, questions, depictions of characters by word and action, and descriptions of movement. The text may suggest onomatopoeic sounds or sounds other than words, such as ripping or sighing or weeping or beating the breast. It may suggest the use of props (real or imaginary), such as a trumpet or a bowl to demonstrate series of seven in Revelation, for example. Revelation depicts, in addition to sights and sounds, a period of silence, sweet and bitter tastes, as well as the odor of sacrifices. The performer seeks to recount the episodes so that audiences can imagine, indeed experience these aspects. All these dimensions give fullness to the text and make it alive for an audience with appeals to all the senses and with many emotions.

In addition, the text suggests occasions when the performer is to show the audience connections with episodes that occur one after another or that are spread across the narrative. For example, the performer might show the connections between the episodes in a series of three in the Gospel of Mark by performing them at the same spot on the stage and/or with the same tone, perhaps in a tone of secrecy or in a whisper. In other cases, it may be necessary for the performer to fill in gaps in a narrative or in an argument with performance features that seem to make good sense of the text—making connections of causation and consequence, of similarity and continuity. These connections might forecast what is to follow or echo what has already been said or done. Many of these features of a text may also be noted by narrative critics and discourse analysts; yet the experience of performing heightens their significance, enlivens their presence, and shows how they work orally. Often, in narrative, connections are implicit and not explicit, due to assumptions the composer makes of the hearer or to the paratactic nature of oral narration. The performer needs to be aware of these gaps and to know where it is appropriate to fill them in order to make sense of the narrative—not by adding words to the text but by discerning what seems to be implied for performance. What is so in narrative is also true of the connections between a series of arguments or examples or teachings in a letter.

As with most exegesis, this procedure of filling gaps is somewhat circular. You hypothesize/infer certain ways to fill the oral/performing gaps, and then you use these inferences in performance to see if that interpretation makes sense of and illuminates the story/speech in the telling. For example, the episode of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1) suggests that the Pharisees were not able to bring charges against Jesus because Jesus did not touch the man when he healed him and therefore did not do work on the Sabbath. When I perform this story, I cannot add this information verbally, but I can suggest that Jesus was about to touch him and then hesitates and does not touch him. By acting out “missing” information, a performer may clarify through interpretation the possible meaning of a composition and perhaps

resolve some gaps and fissures with tone and nonverbal expressions. Indeed, by voice and body language and staging, the performer may serve to embody the coherence of the composition.

### **Personification of Characters**

When acting out a narrative, the performer takes on the role of the narrator. Although the narrator is not a character in the story, the narrator has a definite persona, for example, in manner, tone, intensity, and sense of humor. In this role the narrator is the storyteller addressing the audience. At the same time, the narrator as performer is also reacting to the story while telling it, with emotions and attitudes expressed in voice and body. For example, when a healing is recounted, the narrator-performer may express a tone of amazement both when recounting the outcome of the healing and when describing the response of onlookers. In all, it is important for the performer in the role of narrator to find a voice appropriate to the story and to express a tone that engenders trust in the audience. Knowing the text well, exploring the characters, and understanding the plot all help to determine how one line or the next might be delivered in ways appropriate to the narrative.

As the narrator “acts out” the story, the performer brings the characters to life—each with his or her own attitudes, emotions, physical manner, and vocal traits (Lee and Galati 1977:319). The narrator takes on the distinct role of each of the characters as each speaks and acts in the narrative—by personifying them through voice, tone, pace, posture, facial expressions, and so on. We get the idea from listening to almost any book on tape. With his voice alone on tape, the actor Jim Dale has brought more than two hundred characters to life in the tapes of the *Harry Potter* books. The live performer also uses posture, facial expressions, gestures, and movement to distinguish between characters, most often simply by suggesting these features of a character. The Gospel of Mark has more than fifty different speaking voices and many more characters. Personification helps the audience to see the distinct points of view of the different characters: “an almost imperceptible change of angle, combined with the other changes in posture, muscle tone, facial expression, and voice characteristics, will make it clear that another character is speaking” (Lee and Galati 1977:380). Personifying the characters also enhances entertainment as a means to engage and hold an audience. The importance of engaging an audience was especially crucial in antiquity.

More than that, personification is a form of interpretation. The dynamic of personification leads performers to put themselves in the place of the character, to think about what drives that character, what each character is looking for, what their “desires” are, what their manner of relating is, what their beliefs and values are, and what they are willing to do to accomplish their goals—as an interpretation of the way in which the composition has portrayed them (Pelias 1992:88-89). There is a form of embodiment here in which the performer puts himself or herself into the place of the character and takes his or her role in the story, whether the character happens to be an opponent or a sympathizer of Jesus.

It is important for the performer to “get into” every character. Each character can easily get lost in the overarching voice of the narrator. When this blurring happens, the drives, goals, beliefs, standards, style of speaking, and relationships of each character do not come across to

the audience. The characters may become so stereotyped as to lose the realistic nature of the narrative. I do an exercise that helps me screen out other points of view and focus on one character at a time. For example, when working with Mark I retell an episode from the point of view of one or other of the characters, simply by changing the pronouns and the tone. So in one of the conflict stories with Jesus, I will recount the episode word for word from the point of view of the opponents, changing only the pronouns. In this way I get into their righteous anger and frustration at Jesus' offensive action. Or I will retell a healing story from the point of view of the suppliant and thereby experience in new ways the joy of being brought to health. Retelling the same episode from the point of view of the crowd will get me in touch with the wonder and delight of the healings of Jesus. When I tell a story from the point of view of Jesus, I get in touch with the forcefulness of his authority, the mission that drives his determination, and the focused attention he gives to the characters whom he encounters. All these fill out/fill in the story that the narrator of Mark is telling. Then, when I return to recount an episode from the narrator's point of view, I can move quickly in portraying one character after another, seeking to retain the emotions, attitudes, inflections, and affect I have discovered with each character. This exercise helps me not only to invest in each character but also to see the conflicts, the contrasts, and the relationships between characters much more clearly. This exercise also lays bare how the narrator leads the reader to identify with some characters and to resist others.

Such personification makes it clear that characters are not simply stereotypes, nor are they reducible to mere plot functions. They come to life in performance, however briefly. They become three-dimensional. It is the role of the performer to make the characters memorable, even the minor ones. Through the process of personification, the performer's acute awareness of such diverse points of view in characterization leads the interpreter-performer to understand more sharply the developing plot, what is at stake in the conflicts, the diverse points of view encompassed by the overarching point of view of the narrator, and the power dynamics of the text. For the benefit of the audience, all efforts to "show" each character and to "see" each character in imagination through the eyes of the narrator or other characters enliven the imagination and engagement of the audience—with the result that they are better able to experience what you portray, to see what you see.

In performing a letter or an apocalypse, the performer becomes aware of certain dynamics by seeking to personify the senders—their personal appeals (Galatians and Philemon), self-descriptions (2 Corinthians), depictions of the audience and other characters (Philippians), along with descriptions of events and emotions (Revelation). As "commissioned agent" of the sender/letter-writer, the performer "becomes" the sender in the act of presenting the letter. Since the performer is portraying just one persona (the sender of the letter) throughout the whole letter, the performer may go through many changes in emotion and appeal. The presentation of a letter-sender involves a more sustained and complex personification, a personification that also includes changes in the relationship with the audience as the letter progresses.

### **Onstage/Offstage Focus**

The issue of the performer's focus in addressing an audience directly gets us in touch with the relationship between performer and audience and how the audience figures in the story being told. In most stage productions, the actors never address the audience. They address each other. When there is direct address to an audience, such as may be the case in a one-person show, contemporary oral interpretation distinguishes an onstage focus from an offstage focus. When one is telling a story, the performer directly addresses the audience in front offstage. In a theater production, when an actor has been interacting with other characters onstage and then suddenly turns and addresses the audience directly, this is referred to as "breaking the fourth wall"—that is, the "fourth wall" of the stage area, the imaginary wall that separates the performers from the audience.

The performer of a story is primarily engaged in speaking through this fourth wall directly to the audience offstage. When, however, in the course of telling, the performer personifies a character and speaks as that character, the performer addresses another imaginary character onstage as if inside the world of the story, with the audience "overhearing" and "overseeing" what is being said and done "onstage"—much as an audience would observe one character in a play addressing another character onstage. In a narrative like Mark, the audience is first addressed offstage and then the narrator portrays characters onstage as they come to act and speak. This onstage/offstage focus moves back and forth rapidly and frequently as the narrator weaves the story. Making such a distinction helps to clarify for the audience when the narrator is speaking as the narrator and when the narrator is portraying a character. Thus, the narrator uses personification in onstage/offstage focus as a means to keep the narrator distinct from the characters and thereby be able to lead the audience to identify with some characters and distance themselves from others.

The onstage/offstage distinction helps the performer to bring out the conflicts more clearly for the audience, distinguish the points of view of different characters, show the contrasts between characters, and clarify the developing plot. In so doing, it manifests fully the personification process that the narrator uses to get into the roles of different characters and express their drives and strategies. Onstage/offstage focus also tends to make it more obvious to the audience which characters the narrator is promoting and which characters and actions the narrator is seeking to discourage the audience from identifying with.

In contrast to an approach that uses both onstage and offstage focus, Tom Boomershine (2008) has argued that, in ancient performances, the performer always addressed the audience offstage and made distinctions between characters without using any onstage focus at all. The difference is significant. In this latter scenario the audience is always addressed directly, even when the characters speak. Hence, for example, when Jesus condemns the Pharisees, the narrator-as-Jesus addresses the audience directly—and thereby the audience "becomes" part of the drama by playing the Pharisees for Jesus. When Jesus teaches/corrects the disciples, the audience becomes the disciples being addressed. When the narrator-as-Pharisees addresses Jesus, the audience "becomes" Jesus. In this way, then, the audience is led to identify with all the characters at one time or another. Such a dynamic leads to a distinctively different rhetorical impact on the audience. For example, as Boomershine argues, this approach may have worked to

undercut anti-Judaism in a composition like the Gospel of John—since the audience is led to identify at one point or another with all the characters, including the Jewish opponents of Jesus.

Yet the matter may be more complex yet. The impact of this kind of audience identification may be obviated somewhat by other strategies that the narrator has used to lead an audience in the process of identification—the positive and negative descriptions of characters, the promotion of certain standards that lead the audience to judge the characters positively and negatively, the development of protagonists and antagonists, and so on. For example, even when Jesus is speaking to the audience-as-opponents, the audience may still identify with the pathos or passion of the protagonist Jesus rather than with the opponents being addressed. Nevertheless, in general, the composition-in-performance will mean something different and have a different impact for an audience when the audience is always addressed as the different characters in the story.

Therefore we need to tell and to hear the biblical narratives both with and without the onstage/offstage focus, as a means to understand better the dynamics of the story and its potential rhetoric—“playing” with the text to discern its boundaries and possibilities. This issue is also interesting when applied to letters, in which the performance collapses the onstage/offstage dichotomy—in that the audience becomes a major character (the recipients of the letter) throughout the entire presentation. Different hearers experience different things. When performing a letter, I have found it helpful to assign students as the audience to assume roles from diverse ancient social locations (including those referred to in the letter)—slave, householder, soldier, male/female, outsider, wealthy/poor, and so on—as a way to help us see the differing impact a letter may potentially have had within an audience. Conversations with students in these assumed roles have been quite illuminating.

A performer is aware of the performer’s relationship with the audience that persists throughout a performance as well as the relationships the performer displays between the characters in the story—and their impact on an audience. Experiencing these relationships in performance, either as performer or as audience, will help us to understand better the dynamics of rhetorical impact.

### **Subtext**

Perhaps the most generative feature of performance for research is that of the “subtext.” The subtext refers to the message and impact that the performer conveys in the way a line is delivered. In performance, whether ancient or modern, the subtext represents a layer of meaning that is present in every line. Subtext is a level of exegesis largely unexplored in biblical studies, because silent reading in print does not require one to address the issue of subtext. Yet all performers have to decide what they will convey by *how* they say each line. Consider Jesus’ manner of relating to the disciples in Mark. Take, for example, the line “Don’t you understand yet?” in which Jesus addresses the disciples (Mark 8:17). Does the question imply inquiry, patience, impatience, sarcasm, disappointment, disdain, resignation? This is an obvious example, even to readers, but *every line* requires this kind of reflection. Listen to two different performances of the same passages and experience how differing inflections change the meaning

and impact of the text.

A performer must seek to infer the subtext from the context and then try different subtexts to determine which approaches work best. There is no way to do a performance without conveying a subtext message with every line, no matter how badly done or ill-informed it is. Subtext can be conveyed both by voice and by physical expression (see below). For the most part, however, subtext is conveyed primarily through the voice—what tone to convey, where to put the emphasis, what pace to say it, whether there should be a pause, how loud it should be, and so on. It is a common exercise in oral interpretation to take a simple line and attempt to say the same line in as many different ways as possible. Or take any episode in Mark or a passage in a letter of Paul and try each line with different subtexts to see what works and how it works. This is an exercise well worth doing, if only to see how important the subtexts are and what a difference they can make.

The subtext is not an add-on. Rather, it is integral to and determinative of the meaning and rhetoric of a text. In performance, the subtext is an implicit part of the “text.” There are many clues in a script that suggest how a line can be delivered, and the immediate clues are assessed in relation to the composition as a whole. To look for clues in the text that suggest appropriate subtexts for every line is to see a dimension of the text that may otherwise not even be part of the interpretation.

### **Nonverbal Communication**

Nonverbal expressions can also convey the subtext (E. Botha 1996). Again, both the presence of subtext and embodiment are constitutive of the composition-in-performance. Physical expression or the lack thereof will contribute to the subtext. Nonverbal communication includes gestures, posture, bodily movement, “winks” to the audience, walking or moving around, as well as facial expressions such as a smile, frown, raised eyebrow, grimace, look of surprise or amazement, and so on. In the context of performing a story, these bodily expressions seem to be myriad. Any and all movement—lips, eyes, cocking the head, crossing arms, even the lack of movement—are part of the nonverbal communication. Obviously some movements are more important and integral to meaning than other movements. However, the very embodiment of the composition-in-performance means that physical movement (or the restraint of it) is unavoidable at all times. These represent the body language, the kinesthetic dimensions of performance (Lee and Galati 1977:66-67).

In some cases, the body language is clearly suggested by the text. When you perform any text, it is amazing how many physical gestures are described or implied in the world of the text—touch, lay on hands, shake, kneel, fall at one’s feet, put arms around, run, look up, look around, weep, wash hands, eat, and so on. And it is surprising how much movement from place to place (on the “stage-area”) is suggested in every text, particularly from one episode to another. In other less explicit matters, nonverbal expressions may be inferred from the text and used to convey the subtext to a line. Often these gestures can be conveyed with the slightest movement.

Take the example used above of Jesus saying to his disciples, “Don’t you understand yet?” The subtext of the line can be expressed with hands reaching forward to appeal for

understanding or with arms crossed or a hand on the forehead to indicate frustration or eyes rolling to express disgust or with hands thrown up in the air to reinforce the denseness of the disciples. Again, the nonverbal expressions will be there. What are they conveying? And how does this help us to amplify or narrow interpretive possibilities? The performer's body, even when fairly stationary, conveys something.

The key is this: nonverbal communications do not just reinforce or illustrate verbal communication; rather, they are an integral part of the verbal communication itself, and they often determine its meaning. When I scowl or laugh or scratch my head or show impatience with my body or look puzzled or shrug my shoulders or throw up my hands, I am conveying the potential meanings of a line just as much as the tone and pitch and volume of the words convey it. How, for example, do we use our bodies to show that a line is ironic or humorous or derisive? Again, these nonverbal expressions do not just accompany the composition. They are an integral and indispensable means by which the potential meanings of the words are determined and by which the impact of the rhetoric is conveyed. As with the use of the voice in performance, nonverbal communication becomes an integral part of the composition.

## **Emotions**

The experience of performing recovers the emotive dimensions of a text and makes it clear that emotions are a significant form of persuasion—conveyed by the words of the text, the subtext, and nonverbal communication. Sound itself as a medium is a primary means of conveying and evoking emotion. A common response by audiences to performances of New Testament texts is the surprising realization that these texts express and evoke strong emotions. Many, if not most, of these emotions are explicitly referred to in the text or are strongly implied by the rhetoric. The range of emotions expressed and described in Mark and Revelation, for example, is so extensive as to be astounding—fear, amazement, awe, horror, puzzlement, anguish, grief, frustration, determination, anger, joy, love, and much more. In addition to the voice, via its volume, pitch, pace, and intensity, these emotions may be conveyed by shaking the head, gritting the teeth, laughing, cringing, weeping, employing various facial expressions, and so on. The issue is this: how does the performer express these emotions in such a way as to evoke an emotional response also in the audience? We do not know a great deal about the nature of emotions in antiquity. Nor do we know much about what bodily expressions showed or triggered emotions. Nevertheless, performing the text does serve to engage us with the emotive dimensions of the text and enables us to understand the part emotions played in the meaning and rhetoric of the composition.

Ancient rhetoricians agree that the power of emotion is more persuasive than logical argumentation in oration. The rhetorical “proof” of ethos—the appeal to emotions as a means of persuasion—is pervasive in New Testament letters. Emotions can be implied everywhere in a text. Galatians expresses Paul's love for the Galatians, his anger at their abandonment of the gospel he preached, his disdain for the opponents, his emotional appeal to the experience of the Spirit, the affection of his personal relationship with the Galatians as his children, and his intense desire to bring them back to grace. I used to think some passages in Galatians were personal and

others were impersonal arguments. After performing it over and over, I have come to realize that every line—whether it be ethos, pathos, or logos—represents a personal, indeed emotional, appeal in which Paul considers the stakes to be extremely high. The emotions may vary in type and intensity in the ebb and flow of the letter, but they are always present.

Performance can bring to the fore the emotive dimensions of a text as an integral and indispensable means of conveying its meaning and persuasive power. We exegetes are challenged to cultivate critical thinking that will allow us to assess what are the appropriate emotions expressed by and evoked by the composition.

## **Humor**

There is humor in texts that performers can bring out in the act of performing. We may infer the potential for humor in the text based on such features as fractured grammar, unusual syntax, irony, contrasts, inconsistencies, plays on words, misunderstandings, and revealing insights into human nature. We recover this humor as part of the meaning and rhetoric of the text. As we explore the text, we should not assume that what may be humorous to us will have been humorous to original audiences. Conversely, there may have been things humorous to ancient communities of particular social locations that are not so humorous to us. I am convinced that Jesus' punch lines in the controversies with elites—in which Jesus eludes their efforts to charge him or punctures their pretensions—would have brought howls of delight and expressions of applause from peasant audiences.

Humor is more pervasive in the New Testament than we have judged to be the case. And performing the text brings it out. I have on occasion gotten “on a roll” with humor in the Gospel of Mark that has the audience laughing repeatedly. At such times, I find myself in response to the audience saying lines humorously that I did not previously think were funny, but which suddenly became occasions for great laughter. The series of failures of the disciples in Mark can be tragic and quite humorous at the same time. The “punning” dialogues of misunderstanding between Jesus and other characters in the Gospel of John can be hilarious when seen as a sort of Abbott and Costello repartee about “Who’s on first?” with characters speaking past each other. Such irony can express wry humor that is conveyed with great subtlety. Or it can reflect an absurdity that is acted out through exaggeration. Consider the line to Philemon in Paul’s request on behalf of Onesimus, when he says, “Not to mention that you do owe me your life!” (Philemon 19). Consider Paul’s comment in Galatians wishing that the opponents who favor circumcision would “cut it all off” (Galatians 5:12). The conversation between body parts in 1 Corinthians 12 can be quite amusing—and the humor significantly enhances the power of Paul’s point, as well as its chances of being remembered and repeated!

Humor is a significant part of performing. Again, humor is integral to both meaning and rhetoric. Humor entertains, engages an audience, gives insight, establishes a bond between performer and audience, creates community among those who understand the humor, and is an effective means of persuasion—and also enhances memory. Reading silently may not bring out the humor. By contrast, playing with inflection and pace and body language in performance can enable us to see in what ways passages may be using humor and to what effect.

## Temporal Dimensions

Performing a text from beginning to end enables performer and audience to experience the text in a temporal way. We are used to thinking of the text as a spatial display on the page and to identifying texts by chapters and verses (again, a spatial display). In so doing, we have lost the sense of time that is such an integral part of the performance of a text. In interpreting a written text, we often collect references across a text without regard to sequence. We can stop and reread and go back and forth in our own time with little regard for order. When you perform or hear a text, you become aware of the unstoppable nature of the movement. You also become aware of the temporal sequence of what the hearers know and when they know it, when something new is introduced, how an earlier part prepares the hearers for a later event, and how a later part clarifies and elaborates an earlier event. You become aware, for example, that episodes in a gospel are usually not interchangeable; their location in the sequence of the story is appropriate and often critical to the developing plot and integral to the meaning and impact of episodes that precede and follow (Rhoads 2004:63-94).

Furthermore, one becomes aware of the potential ebbs and flows of a narrative or a letter. There are fluctuations in intensity, variations in emotion, ranges of intimacy and distance, flows in action and description. In the plot, there may be a rise or fall in the action, transitions, shifts and breakthroughs, moments of climax. Things speed up and slow down. The possibilities of the paces and rhythms of a text become apparent in the act of performing. Being in relation to an audience and experiencing its responses as the narrative or letter moves along in time helps the performer to judge the most effective pace, where an emphasis belongs and where a high moment occurs. Standing up, sitting down, moving closer or further from the audience, raising and lowering the volume, along with a variety of gestures, can bring this flow of the narrative to have the greatest impact on the audience. Such experiences may help us to see how the rhetoric of a performance may have worked its magic on ancient audiences.

In addition, there is a distinctive process of persuasion to a story or a letter or an apocalypse that is difficult to understand without performing the composition—an inner logic (deeper than hook words, connections, and transitions) that enables the performer to recall what comes next in the narrative or in the course of an argument. Interestingly, I have found that this temporal coherence of a text may often be found not in the text itself, but in a particular sequence of implied impacts on an audience as they experience the temporal movement of the composition—like the steps in a combination lock as the sequential drops of the tumbler prepare for a final “unlocking.” First, the hearers must know “x” before they are prepared to experience “y,” which in turn enables the audience to accept what comes next, and then leads them to the ultimate place the performer wants them to be.

In Mark the hearers will not be prepared to accept Jesus as a rejected messiah until they become convinced that Jesus is the messiah through his healings, exorcisms, and nature miracles. In experiencing Galatians, the audience must go through a sequence of affirmations, appeals, and arguments that Paul must make before that moment comes in the performance when Paul is “confident that you will take no other view” (Galatians 5:10). He moves from his own story to their story to God’s story, weaving these together until he comes to that clarion call, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1). Paul assumes (rightly or wrongly) that the

audience begins at a certain place with certain assumptions and allegiances and attachments. He has to take the hearer from one position or point of view to another, so that the audience is at a different place at the end than they were at the outset. In other words, there is a temporal sequence to the rhetoric of the letter; the arguments have an inner logic and cannot be dealt with in just any order. And they have an accumulative impact on the audience.

A similar sequence takes place in the experience of the hearers of Revelation. The hearers must first know what Jesus expects and that he can see into their hearts (the letters); then they must know the evil nature of Rome (the beast and the whore) before they are prepared to reject Rome; then, they must grieve their own loss of Rome and detach from it before they can embrace the New Jerusalem. The expressions of worship throughout Revelation prepare them to be attached to the New Jerusalem when it comes and thereby enable them to withdraw from Rome now and be willing to die in allegiance to the God of a new heaven and earth. Returning to the image of the combination lock, the narrator of Revelation leads the hearers to the point when the tumblers have fallen and the lock is ready to be opened. In other words, there is a dynamic to the cognitive and emotional catharsis the hearers are being led through from beginning to end—a rhetorical dynamic that gives continuity to a text located in successive responses of the audience, a dynamic that is difficult to discern without the experience of doing a performance. Comprehending the sequential developments of a composition in terms of their impact on hearers adds a fresh perspective to the work of interpreters.

### **Rhetoric and Audience**

I keep coming back to the rhetorical impact of the New Testament compositions because my experience has been that performance enables one to be especially aware of the significance of audience and context. We exegetes often talk about ancient audiences and imagine their reactions. Often our constructions of these contexts are vague or general. To perform a text is to become aware of the audience and its impact upon performance in a very specific and immediate way. The setting of the audience matters. To perform in a university or in a church or in a prison or on the street corner or at a homeless shelter leads the performer to perform texts differently. The same must have been true for the ancient world—synagogue or marketplace or private home or public building. Also, social location of the audience matters. A text takes on different meanings spoken by and to people in different social locations. People identify with different characters, connect with different sayings, desire differing outcomes for the plot, and so on. The sociopolitical context matters. What is going on in people's lives and in the larger world at the time brings issues and resonances to the experience of the performance.

In my opinion there is no better way to be in touch with the rhetorical impact upon an audience than to perform before a live audience. Simple reading may eclipse the rhetorical impact. Reading-exegetes tend to focus on what the text *means* and neglect what the text *does* in performance. Even those who study the rhetoric of letters tend to focus on the organizational dynamics of the text and the identification of ethos and pathos rather than on the experience of an audience. Clearly the text is more powerful in performance than in reading; thus performing offers a better chance to be in touch with the rhetorical dynamics. As we have suggested, the

performer is seeking to draw the audience into the world of the composition and to persuade the audience to take on the point of view presented in the text.

But more than this, the experience of performing has convinced me that we need to expand our idea of the various kinds of impact a narrative or letter may have had on hearers. Persuading an audience to embrace a certain viewpoint or persuading an audience to take a certain action are only some of the effects that may result from a performance. For example, Mark does not just give people the reasons not to be paralyzed by fear; rather, the rhetorical dynamic of the gospel also seeks to evoke in the audience the actual capacity to be faithful in the face of threat. The composer of Matthew does not just condemn hypocrisy; his sayings serve to expose/reveal it in the audience. The creator of John does not just talk about eternal life; he seeks to create the experience of it in the audience. In Philemon, Paul does not just want Philemon to take a certain action; the letter seeks to effect a transformation of relationships from hierarchy to mutuality in the whole community. The author of James does not just promote a certain viewpoint to a disengaged reader; he wants to generate in the hearers the capacity to be wise in their context. Our challenge as exegetes is to ask what the composition-in-performance is doing and how it does it.

Furthermore, performance generates transformation not primarily for individuals but for communities. Performances in a communal setting create and solidify community. The shared event gives the audience an experience of solidarity. The community has experienced the performance together; the event becomes part of their social memory. The performer seeks to create or strengthen the communal dimensions of the audience through inside information, irony, humor, drama, the evocation of emotions, and much more. In addition, New Testament compositions addressed such communal issues as factions, lethargy, fear of persecution, apostasy, and misunderstandings; and they sought to bring to the community unity, inspiration, corporate courage, loyalty, and clarity. Reading that focuses on the text may overlook the kinds of immediate responses we can imagine as a direct result of the communal responses to a performance. Of course, intentionally or unintentionally, a performance can also exacerbate the dueling forces within the community or generate conflict between the community and those outside.

Finally, in generating a new way of being in the world, the composition/performer seeks to lead a community to see itself as an alternative way of thinking about the world and to experience itself as a counter-cultural community. The performance is nothing less than an attempt to create a world. In all these instances, how did the compositions-in-performance do that? And how might we imagine that communal audiences actually responded to such performances?

I have found that the post-performance conversations I have with an audience have given me an opportunity to reflect on all these factors and to reinforce them. Each performance is an expression of that particular performer's interpretation of the text in that context with that particular audience. Even if the words spoken are exactly the same, the text is still fluid in its diverse performative incarnations. Even the same performer will enact or embody the text in different ways on different occasions with different audiences in different places. Other performers will interpret the text differently and will defend their interpretations. The point is that the exegete as performer gets in touch with the fact that there are rhetorical dimensions to

every line in the developing composition, all of which contribute to the overall impact of each performance. Conversations with audiences about their experiences have helped me to grasp these rhetorical dimensions more clearly.

### **Performance as Test of Interpretation**

Finally, I have written about the way in which performance can expand the range of interpretations and also reveal the limits of interpretation. How can performance be a test of interpretations? We often give interpretations of the text without ever asking: could the lines be performed in such a way that the hearer would understand the meaning you are giving to it? Can the subtext stretch to accommodate an interpretation such that the audience can “get it”? I am not here writing about the fact that modern hearers would have to know certain cultural information to understand a line. Rather, I am asking whether the line can even be said at all in such a way as to express a certain interpretation. For example, some Markan scholars understand Jesus’ words about the poor widow in the temple (Mark 12:41-44) to be a criticism of the widow for contributing to a corrupt temple that is doomed to destruction. However, I cannot figure out a way to perform that line—in which Jesus lifts her up as a model (12:43-44)—so as to convey a negative meaning to it. Or could one convey Jesus’ cry of abandonment on the cross (Mark 15:34 from Psalm 22:2) so as to express hopefulness? We can see the response of the centurion (Mark 15:39) as affirmation or confession, but can the centurion’s line work in performance as sarcasm?

For example, take your interpretation of something and test it by saying the lines in such a way that you actually bring across to an imaginary audience, ancient or modern, that particular interpretation of the text. Of course, the text has a range of possible meanings and a range of possible performances. Through performances, we may be able to identify which interpretations have a consensus, which interpretations are controversial but permitted, and which interpretations constitute a fundamental misconstrual of the possibilities of the text (Pelias 1992:159). In this way, performance may be an important way to test the limits of viable interpretations and provide criteria for making critical judgments in adjudications over interpretation.

### **Conclusion**

All these performance choices together comprise an interpretation—not as a commentary, not as a monograph, not as a lecture about the text, but as a performance of the text. This is an incarnation, an embodiment, of the text. In a sense, the performer becomes the text. Yet in an even larger sense the Bible becomes embodied in the community in the performance event—by performance, by response, by memory. Rather than a book, the performer and audience become the medium. Just as a reader interprets the words on the page, so the audience interprets what the performer has presented. Experiencing the performance—a performer in community—places interpretation in a public and communal arena. Such efforts to recover the original medium of the

biblical traditions, including all the facets of performance articulated here, may provide many new dimensions to the Bible and its interpretation. Interpretation lies at the site of performance.

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