

# Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part I

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*David Rhoads*

## Abstract

This paper argues for the centrality of performance in the life of the early church, an area of study that has been traditionally neglected. In light of some emerging trends, it proposes that we establish “performance criticism” as a discrete discipline in New Testament studies to address this neglect. Performance criticism would inform in fresh ways our understanding of the meaning and rhetoric of the Second Testament writings and our re-constructions of early Christianity. Because it represents a medium change, performance criticism has the potential to impact the way we do biblical studies in general. Finally, performance could breathe new life into the experience of the Bible in the contemporary world. In Part 1, I lay out some features of oral cultures, the potential interplay between written and oral media, and the origins in orality of Second Testament writings. Then, I seek to identify the various features of a performance event—performer, audience, material setting, social circumstances, and so on—as a basis to construct and analyze performance as the site of interpretation for Second Testament writings. In Part 2, I show how performance criticism could draw upon resources from many established and some new disciplines of biblical scholarship as contributors to performance criticism. Finally, I suggest that performance criticism might engage the interpreter in the actual performing of texts, and I lay out the potential research benefits of such an exercise.

In spite of the explosion of new methodologies in biblical studies in recent decades, we are only now beginning to assess the importance of performance in the (re-)constructions of early Christianity and in our interpretations of the writings of the Second Testament. Consider the following: the overwhelming majority of first century Christians (perhaps 95%) experienced their traditions—including gospels, letters, and apocalypses—only in some form of oral performance. Performances were a central and an integral part of the early Christian experience of the compositions that have now come down to us in written form in the Second Testament. The collection of Second Testament writings we now have are records of what early Christians experienced in speech by performers in the community. They were either written “transcriptions” of oral narratives that had been composed in performance or they were composed orally by dictation and written for use in oral performance. These compositions *were* oral presentations. There was a performer or storyteller. The performances were heard/experienced

rather than read. There was a communal audience. There was a physical location and a socio-historical circumstance that shaped the performance and the reception. Frequently, perhaps more often than not, no written text was present to the event. Why have we not given greater attention to the performance dimension of the ancient world and to the experience of biblical performances by ancient Christian au-

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David Rhoads, Ph.D. (Duke), co-author of *MARK AS STORY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NARRATIVE OF A GOSPEL* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), author of *READING MARK, ENGAGING THE GOSPEL* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2004), and editor of *FROM EVERY PEOPLE AND NATION: THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) is Professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology, 1100 E. 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615 (e-mail: DRhoads@lstc.edu). The author expresses gratitude to Tom Boomershine and Werner Kelber as pioneers and mentors in this endeavor.

diences? The purpose of this article is to identify “performance criticism” (cf. Doan & Giles) as a research method to explore and investigate this dimension of early Christian life and literature.

When you think of the Second Testament writings as performance literature—either as transcriptions of prior oral compositions or as written compositions designed for oral performance—you wonder why Second Testament scholars do not function more like musicologists or dramatists. Interpretation of music and drama is done primarily by both performers and music/drama specialists. Can you imagine a musicologist who does nothing but sit in libraries and study the score of a composition without ever hearing a performance of it? Would it not seem strange for interpreters of drama, including ancient Greek drama, to analyze a play apart from interpretations of it in performance? Similarly, does it not seem odd that biblical critics interpret writings that were composed *in and for oral performance*—as gospels, letters, and apocalypses were—without ever experiencing performances of them and without giving some attention to the nature of the performance of these works in ancient and modern times?

When viewed this way, we realize that performance should be an important site for the interpretation of the biblical writings (Maclean). Performance is the place where interpretations are expressed, interpretations are tested, and interpretations are critiqued. Theoretically, at least, this should place oral performance at the center of Second Testament interpretation and make it an integral part of Second Testament research. We have lost the dynamic of performance of the Second Testament compositions ever since the first centuries of the early church. Although other art forms have been used to express the Bible, such as painting, sculpture, and music (Hart & Guthrie), this has been much less the case with theater and oral interpretation of the writings. As we have sought to recover the story dynamics of biblical writings in the wake of what Hans Frei called “The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative,” so now we need to address the “eclipse of biblical orality.”

In this two-part essay, I wish to argue for a focus on ancient performance as an object of study and for contemporary performing as a method of research into the meaning and rhetoric of the Second Testament writings. How might we rethink early Christianity with performance as an integral part of communal life in an oral culture? How might the experience of contemporary performances inform our interpretation of texts?

## Gap in Second Testament Studies

Although my focus here is on formal performances in a gathered community, I am defining performance in the broadest sense as any oral telling/retelling of a brief or lengthy tradition—from saying to gospel—in a formal or informal context of a gathered community by trained or untrained performers—on the assumption that every telling was a lively recounting of that tradition.

Until recently, the performance event has been somewhat of a blind spot, a rather large lacuna, in Second Testament studies. Historical critics have affirmed the role of oral tradition going back to Jesus, but they have not imagined the precise mode/dynamics for passing it on. Form critics have not focused on the actual proclaiming by those who passed on the tradition. Genre critics have not asked how the rhetoric of a particular genre works in performance, when the composition is seen and heard. Narrative critics have seen the role of the narrator as a feature of the written text rather than as the voice of a performer, and they have not considered multiple implied audiences. Reader-response critics have seldom dealt with the aural impact of the text’s rhetoric or the phenomenon of a communal audience. Rhetorical critics have treated species of argumentation and types of proof but have done little with memorization and delivery. Orality studies have focused on the ethos of oral cultures and are only recently turning their attention to the act of performing itself. Linguistic critics have only begun to include the role of sound and the impact of features of discourse upon hearers. Ideological criticism has not considered oral performance/audience as part of the power dynamics of the text. Gender studies have only now addressed the differing dynamics of storytelling and performance by males and females.

In some ways, the neglect of a focus on performance is understandable. How can we (re-)construct something as elusive and fleeting as an ancient performance? How can we distinguish ancient from modern sensibilities in relation to performance? How can we ever overcome the language barriers and the cultural differences? How would we develop criteria to create and evaluate performances? How can we critically assess something so subjective and emotional? Besides, we have written texts in hand and we know how to interpret them; so what difference would it make in our interpretations of them that they were first performed? And what could we possibly learn from modern performances of a Second Testament text?

Our own cultural experience of the Second Testament texts in the contemporary Western world has been private

and silent reading by individuals or public reading that has fragmented the text into lectionary lessons in the context of parish worship and teaching. In scholarship, we have fixed our attention on written texts so exclusively that we have not even thought about experiencing whole texts in a theater setting or about listening to the Greek Testament as a way to interpret. We have not reflected much on the holistic, communal experiences of oral performance in the early church. Seldom do we interpreters consider doing a performance ourselves as an act of interpretation. But now, fortunately, we have begun to turn our attention to the phenomenon of performance in an oral culture and to the experience of the texts in performance.

### Performance Criticism as an Emerging Discipline

Performance criticism is an emerging discipline. The methodology was first explored and has been kept alive for several decades by the section in the Society of Biblical Literature on “The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media,” which has led to many sessions that either sponsored performances or dealt with the dynamics of performance in an oral culture. These sessions also produced several *Semeia* volumes on orality, each of which includes some treatment of performance (Silberman; Dewey 1995a). Scholars of the Gospels and Pauline writings have begun to talk about hearers rather than readers and to identify oral features of the narratives and the letters—scholars such as Thomas Boomershine (1987), Joanna Dewey (1989; 1991; 1992; 1994), and Elizabeth Malbon (1993). B. B. Scott and Margaret Dean made a “sound map” of the Sermon on the Mount to chart repetitions and rhythms in the Greek sounds (cf. Dean). Casey Davis and John Harvey have each identified oral patterning in Paul’s letters. Pieter Botha has written numerous articles on orality and the role of oral performance in the early church. Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper have treated Q as an oral performance (1999). Horsley has interpreted Mark in the context of an oral culture (2001). Whitney Shiner’s book, *PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL*, has made a breakthrough in seeking to construct ancient performance scenarios of the Gospel of Mark from a plethora of Greco-Roman sources. William Shiell has offered a similar study on the Acts of the Apostles. Antoinette Wire (2002) and Holly Hearon (2004) have explored the patterns of informal storytelling of men and women in the Jewish and emerging Christian communities. Most recently, Horsley, Draper, and John Miles Foley have edited a volume on Mark called *PER-*

*FORMING THE GOSPEL*. Other published resources could be mentioned. In addition, each year a handful of papers at the annual convention of the Society of Biblical Literature deal with orality and with performance features of biblical texts. Recent conferences have treated the role that performance plays in social memory (Kirk & Thatcher). The Society of New Testament Studies now has a seminar section on “The New Testament, Oral Culture, and Bible Translation.” There is now a consultation of scholars at the annual conference of the Network of Biblical Storytellers. In terms of contemporary performances, there are a few actors who are available to perform biblical selections. Also, there are some videotapes available for viewing oral performances of some Second Testament writings (Malbon 2002: 107–14).

My own journey in this emerging discipline of performance criticism has primarily involved translating, memorizing, and performing biblical works before live audiences. To be sure, I have done the performing with English translations. Nevertheless, the experience has enabled me to perform for audiences of various kinds and has gotten me in touch in an immediate way with distinctive interpretive and rhetorical dimensions of various Second Testament texts. My performances have included the Gospel of Mark, the Sermon on the Mount, selections of Jesus’ teaching on wealth and poverty from Luke, scenes from John, Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, Philemon, the Letter of James, I Peter, and the Book of Revelation.

The experience of translating, memorizing, and performing these works has placed me in a fresh medium, an entirely different relationship with these texts than that of a silent reader and even quite distinct from the experience of hearers in an audience (Rhoads 2004: 176–201). By taking on the persona/voice of the narrator or speaker in a text, I enter the world of the text, grasp it as a whole, reveal this world progressively in a temporal sequence, attend to every detail, and gain an immediate experience of its rhetoric as a performer seeking to have an impact on an audience. I have gotten in touch with the emotive and kinetic dimensions of the text in ways I would not otherwise have been aware. As I practice performance, the words come off the page and become sounds in my inner hearing before I speak. Eventually, I am no longer seeing words on a page or anticipating sounds in my head. Rather, I imagine the scenes in my mind and I tell/show what I “see/hear” to a living audience before me. My students who learn texts for performance also speak of the enlivening of their imagination, a new capacity to identify with the different characters, a fresh sense of the emotive dimensions of the texts, and an experience of their rhetorical power.

The audiences of these performances are also experiencing the text in a fresh medium. When I perform in contemporary settings, people speak of a second naiveté, as though they were experiencing the story or letter for the first time. They comment on the new insights that come from hearing in contrast to reading, how unique it is to experience the whole story/letter at one sitting, how they get drawn into the world of the story, how inflection and tone give fresh meaning to this line or that episode, and how the story/letter/apocalypse impacts them in new ways. There emerges a relationship between performer and audience that assists in the act of interpretation. I have gotten many insights into texts by attending to the responses of these audiences—both during performances and also in discussions afterward. In this way, performing and hearing have become major tools of research for me in the study of the Second Testament. They have become the primary means by which I come to interpret the meaning and rhetoric of a text.

The challenge of performance criticism is to draw these and other strands together to form a coherent discipline that is able to give a comprehensive account of the oral dynamics of performance events in the early church.

### Oral Culture as Context for Performance

Manuscripts may have been essential for the spread of Christianity, but, in contrast to our general perception, manuscripts of Christian writings were *not central* to the experience of the first century churches. Rather, performances were central to the life of the early church, while texts as such were peripheral. In order to grasp the centrality of such performances, we need to reflect on the first century as an oral culture (Achte-meier).

Scholars seem to be in agreement that the first century Mediterranean world was basically comprised of oral cultures. So what do we know about oral cultures in general that would assist us in understanding this first-century context? (Lord; Havelock 1963; Finnegan 1992; Foley 1981; Edwards & Sienkewicz; Niditch; Ong 1967; 1988; Furniss). In societies in which more than 90% of the people are peasants and there is no middle class, very few people could read or write. For almost everyone, speaking and hearing and observation were the primary media of interaction. Education that involved reading and writing was available almost exclusively to elites, and writing materials were scarce and expensive. In the Roman world, as little as five to eight percent of the people (and perhaps less) were able to read; a much smaller percentage were able to write; and even fewer

could do either with facility (Bar-Ilan; Botha 1992a; Bowman & Woolf; Cole; Dewey 1995b; Gamble; Harris; Millard). Estimates of literacy in the Land of Israel range as low as 2 to 3%. The ancient Mediterranean cultures were overwhelmingly oral in nature.

Walter Ong argues that in order to conceptualize such an oral culture, we have to envision a world very different from our print/electronic culture. Without entering into the obvious complexities and diversities of actual cultures, the following features reflect a general profile of the overall dynamics of oral cultures. An oral culture is a world in which sound is the basic medium of communication. Everything that one learns and passes on is done in the context of conversation in a situation. Communication in traditional cultures of orality is therefore relational, because it occurs in interaction between people. Sustained thinking takes place in conversation. Because speech is relational, the interaction is empathetic and participatory. Speech can bind groups together. Oral societies are collectivist cultures in which the focus is on group identity and on individuals only in so far as they are embedded in groups and situations. The values and beliefs that are shared are formed and maintained by the community in immediate interaction with each other. Intelligence and ethics are not abstract or detached but oriented to concrete situational and operational frames of reference like crafts, practices, and rituals. People learn by observation and by apprenticing in specific contexts. The focus of people is public/social and outward toward others rather than private and introspective. Speech is experienced as an event that is dynamic and operational. Speech, particularly rhetorical speech, is sometimes agonistic, because it often occurs in contexts in which there is an in-group and an out-group.

In oral cultures, what is “known” is primarily what is shared and remembered by the community through social interaction (Kirk & Thatcher; Kelber 2006). Skilled/experienced performers are the primary tradents of this socially-shared knowledge and memory, with diverse styles of performance being expressed among both men and women. Such tradents are faithful to the past (retentive) as a means to preserve group identity and fluid in the retelling (inventive) in order to make traditions relevant. Preserving social memory is an important means to generate and sustain community. Collective memory can be a means to engender solidarity. To facilitate the preservation of social memory, it is important to create powerful speech that is memorable—resulting commonly in such forms of speech as proverbs, stories, repetitions, alliterations, contrasts, epithets, and formulas. These features of an oral culture provide a context in which to in-

interpret the Second Testament writings as performances.

We need to be cautious about using this profile of a primary oral culture as the context for early Christianity, because each oral culture is different (Loubser 2006) and because the presence of writing shaped each culture along a spectrum of influences. Scholars are assessing the complex dynamics of the impact of written texts in oral cultures (Kelber 1983; 1994; Goode; Finnegan 1988; Goody).

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Studying the Second Testament writings as performance literature will involve a radical shift from our exclusive focus on them as “writings.” . . . To bear the fruits of such study, we need to rethink our methods, reassess the objects of our study, and develop skills we may not have used before.

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In the first-century Mediterranean cultures, there were manuscripts, including scripture; there were professional scribes who could read and write; there were limited educational practices (for elites) that made use of reading and writing; and writing was a primary means for authorities to govern and keep control. To reflect this distinctiveness, scholars have sometimes referred to ancient Judea as a “manuscript culture” or a “scribal culture” or a “rhetorical culture” (e. g. Robbins). However, these epithets can be misleading—as if to say that the whole culture was characterized primarily by the influence of manuscripts and scribes. On the contrary, ancient Judea was a *predominantly oral culture* in which there were some scribes and a limited number of manuscripts that were available to elites and that primarily served the dynamics of orality. This is not to deny that the presence of writing and manuscripts made a difference. There was perhaps a scribal culture or a rhetorical culture among elites. But for the vast majority of people, the ethos of an oral culture predominated (Dewey 1995b).

For the most part, writing served the efforts of empires and elites to establish and maintain hegemony—through records, laws, propaganda, official communications, inscriptions, commerce, and so on (Draper; Bowman & Woolf; Haines & Eitzen). The capacity to read and write on the part of the very few reinforced already existing power dynamics between the small percentage of ruling elites and the vast majority of peasants and expendables in pre-industrial agrar-

ian societies. As part of this divide, the non-literate peasants may have been the bearers of what sociologists have come to call the “little tradition,” while the literate elites were bearers of the “great tradition”—differing selections and interpretations of the traditions that, respectively, helped the peasants to survive and the elites to maintain social control (Horsley).

Once manuscripts were present, the nature of performances in oral cultures was also affected. Among Christians in the first century, however, the influence of manuscripts may have been small, because most performances would not have been dependent on a manuscript at all. Consider that most of the (few) Second Testament writings from this period were penned between 50 and 100 CE (at least 20 years after the death of Jesus) and that the oral traditioning process continued fully throughout the first century. Most of these writings were not even in existence until the last 20 years of the first century. Even when they did come into existence, the number of manuscripts was limited, it took time for them to be copied and to circulate, and they primarily served as aids to oral performances—to serve as a resource for a performance, to aid memory, to be dictated as oral letters in the absence of the sender, and to facilitate the spreading of the traditions from one location to another. The vast majority of people would have had no direct contact with manuscripts. In any given community, the number of scrolls of Christian writings, if any, would have been severely limited. The presence of a scroll, such as a scripture text, could serve as a symbol to enhance oral authority. That was true of the scriptures of Israel, but it was probably not yet so in the first century for the early Christian writings (Dewey 1995b). Later, from the second century on, Christianity actually contributed to the spread of literacy and manuscripts in the empire, and the writings gained authority (Alexander 1998; Gamble).

There are lively debates among scholars about all these matters. And the viewpoints have come to express an appreciation for the complexity of the issues. Early in the study of oral cultures, there was a tendency to set up the dynamics of orality and literacy as binary opposites that involved radically different cognitive operations and that generated contrasting and even incompatible cultures. Now there is an awareness of the ways in which orality and literacy can interact in both conflictual and complementary ways as they are configured in any given culture (Kelber 1994; Ong 1988; Havelock 1986; Tannen). The presence and effect of the interface between orality and literacy falls along a spectrum. And one of the challenges of performance criticism is to assess the nature of oral cultures in the first century and to determine

the impact of literacy in the life of the early church.

On that spectrum, it is quite clear that the oral cultures of the first century are vastly different from our contemporary print/electronic cultures in many ways. Studying the Second Testament writings as performance literature will involve a radical shift from our exclusive focus on them as “writings.” If we are to bear the fruits of such study, we need to rethink our methods, reassess the objects of our study, and develop skills we may not have used before.

### Performances in a Predominantly Oral Culture

When we seek to imagine performances in oral cultures, we moderns need to shift our thinking from written to oral, from private to public, from “public readers” to performers, from silent readers to hearers/ audience, from individual to communal audience, and from manuscript transmission to oral transmission. In an oral culture, stories, rhetorical speeches, and letters were composed in or for oral/aural events, most often in mental preparation for performance and in the course of performance itself—as music is often composed and revised “by ear.” The Second Testament writings are transcriptions/ transpositions of such oral utterances into writing, sometimes a written accounting of one of many performances of an oral composition given over time. As transpositions to writing, they were employed not to replace orality with literacy but to enhance orality. The writing of gospels and letters stimulated oral composition, served social memory, and enabled oral compositions to spread more easily from one geographical location to another. Hence, the early church experienced their traditions as part of their oral world, and manuscripts themselves were peripheral rather than central to the life of the early church. In a presentation to the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Dennis Dewey suggested that the Second Testament manuscripts are like the few archaeological fragments that remain from an oral culture, fossil imprints of what were once flesh and blood performances.

In regard to performances in a predominantly oral culture, manuscript scrolls as such were of limited help, because they were expensive, cumbersome to hold, awkward to use in a performance, and difficult to read (with no spaces between words, no punctuation, and no lower case/upper case distinctions). There is little evidence for silent reading in antiquity (Achtmeier; Gilliard; Yaghjian). “Reading” referred to public recitation. Some practicing performers may have read aloud in private in order to fix the contents of a manuscript

in memory for public oral performance. When performers did “read” a manuscript in public before an audience, they would be doing so under adverse circumstances, often in low light. Because of the nature of manuscripts, the performers would, for all intent and purpose, need to have the contents memorized ahead of time. A performer may have held a scroll in the (left) hand as a sign of authenticity or authority but without consulting it (Shiell). Straight reading in public would have been somewhat awkward and not very effective rhetorically. It is probable that the term for “public readers” in the Second Testament actually referred to performers who may have had a written text at hand but who did not depend upon it as public readers might do today.

It is likely therefore that most public performances were not dependent on manuscripts. Performers would have composed short and lengthy pieces of tradition in the course of preparing and telling, much as contemporary stand-up comedians prepare their material by ear as a means to get just the right sound, to formulate precisely the most effective wording, to adopt the most appropriate gestures, facial expressions, and postures, and to perfect their timing. Comedians prepare for lengthy televised monologues by practicing their material before many diverse audiences in nightclubs and other venues. Ancient performers composed and recomposed their material in the context of numerous performances before diverse audiences and in the context of differing social circumstances.

Although there is some evidence for rote memorization, nevertheless most performers who made use of a manuscript would not have memorized the written text as though it were a modern theater script to be mastered for performance. Rather, generally speaking, the performer was expected to “improvise” on the composition (Foley 2002). Once committed to print, written texts were fixed. By contrast, oral performances were fluid and living. That contrast may have been part of the background to Paul’s saying that “the letter kills but the spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6). There may be some question about how much the performer was free to improvise or needed to be faithful to the written manuscript, say, for example, with a manuscript like one of the letters of Paul. Studies of performances in living oral cultures suggest that performers composed and re-composed, shaped and re-shaped, the stories *in performance*. The performers had the responsibility to put their own take on the story, fit it to the immediate audience and situation, and even adjust it to the responses of the audience in the very course of performing. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that similar fluidity existed even in the written traditions of Judaism and early

Christianity and that this fluidity in written texts was the result of scribes who did not copy slavishly but who functioned like performers—recomposing the tradition as they wrote (Person; Parker). Scribes themselves may well have been among the oral performers of the time; so it would not be surprising if they functioned as performers when they composed or copied in writing.

However, in an oral culture, the audiences and the tradents were the primary transmitters rather than the scribes. Most people may have been able to retell the stories and letters with various capacities, whether in formal or informal contexts. Even very long narratives could be reproduced (and re-composed) orally. Trained performers who heard the compositions of others did not have to be literate to perform. Many of them quickly memorized the “frame” of a story, a frame that would aid memory and into which they would then add, omit, and vary details in order to make the content and its rhetoric situation-specific (Shiner). People with gifts for memory and oratory stand out in such a culture and may have received training from a mentor. Just as there are people with photographic memories in print cultures, so there are people with audiographic/kinesthetic memories in oral cultures. Some people in an oral culture are able to hear/see a lengthy narrative performed and repeat it with great faithfulness, much as some pianists and other instrumentalists are able to hear musical compositions once and reproduce them with astounding accuracy and even new flair (Baddeley; Boorstin; Yates). So, the transmission and reception of the text did not go primarily from manuscript to manuscript but from audience reception to audience reception in memory. When texts were involved, the movement was not from text to speech but from speech to text and back again.

Oral compositions facilitated the process of oral/aural reception and transmission by including features that enhanced memory. The compositions were episodic, redundant (with variation), additive, aggregative, genre-driven, with parallels and contrasts, chiasmic patterns, plot markers, mnemonic hook words, and featuring memorable stories, proverbial sayings, and vivid analogies. The surviving transcriptions bear the imprint of these oral performances. We are now able to identify many oral features of extant written texts. Our challenge is to figure out how they worked orally in performance.

This picture of performance in an oral culture reinforces a conception of the social nature of tradition. Communities regularly appropriated and re-appropriated the oral compositions as their means to build, maintain, and change the identity of the community. In such a context, the spectrum of people who engaged in oral performance of traditions ex-

tended from “trained storytellers” on one end of the spectrum to folks engaged in “informal gossip” on the other end of the spectrum (Botha 1998; Rohrbaugh), both women and men (Hearon 2004; Dewey 1996). The traditions ranged from lengthy, formal, public performances to individual stories or clusters of stories told among family and friends. Male and female kin and village folk with a knack for storytelling would be sought out by their acquaintances. The role of storyteller could pass from person to person within a village, a group, or a family. In the early church, every Christian was probably a performer/ storyteller in some sense at one time or another in informal contexts in which the passing of the tradition was an extemporaneous and spontaneous response to particular situations—indeed a lively interjection into ordinary conversation.

Formal, public performances in synagogues and market places and houses were common because they were the entertainment/ educational/ religious/ political occasions for gathering in the life of a community. In these contexts, there were people who were especially trained or at least accustomed to performing lengthy oral compositions and to performing them well. They also seem to have been skilled at performance according to certain conventions of storytelling that made it easier for the audiences to understand what was being said. Communities/ audiences may not have stood for it any other way. In fact, it is hard to imagine the spread of Christianity without the presence of engaging and powerful performances by effective storytellers and rhetors. The apparent appeal of Apollo (1 Cor 1:10–17) and the super-apostles (2 Cor 11:1–6) may attest to that. The same could be said for Paul at times. In fact, the capacity to perform well may have been expected in the role of apostle. At the same time, there is a strain of performance in the Second Testament that relishes the idea that ordinary people without rhetorical and storytelling skills could be vehicles for the powerful effects of the Spirit in their speech. Paul’s own efforts to play down his oratorical ability may have had something to do with this phenomenon. In Corinth, his lack of oratorical display may to some extent have been deliberate (1 Cor 2:1–5), whereas he seems to have made a dramatic and powerful performance in Galatia (3:1). What could a focus on performance as such contribute to our understanding of these dynamics?

## **Second Testament Writings in Relation to Performance**

The early Christian writings that have survived can be

seen, then, as compositions for performance in the larger context of an oral ethos (Hearon 2006). Many scholars think that the Gospel of Mark was composed orally and then written down on some occasion in its performance life. We have to consider that Matthew and Luke may have been composed the same way or perhaps dictated orally to a scribe. The authors of Matthew and Luke may themselves have been performers, such that their Gospels might have arisen from a combination of oral and written influences (Dunn). Q may have been a (composite) oral composition that was never written down (Horsley & Draper). The Gospel of John seems to be comprised of a series of dialogues of encounter between Jesus and other characters—typifying the primary characteristic of oral speech, namely, repetition with variation. If Matthew, Luke, and John were in fact written before they were performed, they were in any case composed not for private reading but with oral performance as the expected medium—an approach to writing that would have been the primary factor in shaping style, content, and rhetoric. All of the Gospels in writing would have reflected and facilitated oral performance. At the same time, their existence in writing may also have exercised some controls on the compositional liberties of the performers. We imagine that a manuscript was one means to transfer the gospel story for oral performance in another location, although at the earlier stages the sending of a performer may have been the primary means of spreading the stories. Furthermore, it is likely that all the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles were composed with the expectation that they would be performed in their entirety on each performance occasion. Nevertheless, we might well ask: Were new genres and/or new lengths of composition, new styles and fresh rhetorical strategies, accessible with the presence of writing and manuscripts (Kelber 1983)?

Also, we know that the letters of Paul were composed orally by Paul (Botha 1992b; 1993a; Dewey 1995b; Loubser 1995) and recorded by a scribe or amanuensis (Longenecker; Richards), perhaps in several sessions—a possibility that may explain the stops and starts of a letter such as Philippians. Much thought and oral practice probably went into the preparation of these oral compositions. The written transcription facilitated the transmission and confirmed the composer and his message (compare, for example, Gal 6:11 and Phlm 19). The letters were carried by hand and then delivered orally—presumably performed by heart or performed as a “reading” in a public setting before a house church or other gathering. It is likely that the emissary who delivered a Pauline letter was the one who performed it

for the community. Such a person would have been present when Paul composed the letter and familiar with the community to which it was directed. It is also likely that Paul gave instructions to the man or woman (some suggest that Phoebe performed Romans) on how the letter was to be performed—tone, emphases, emotions, gestures, pauses, pace, and so on. In any case, the focus was on the performer and on the performance—and not on the written text.

The community always experienced the letter in the person of the performer. That is to say, Paul sent a *person* to represent him, not primarily a letter (Mitchell; Funk; Ward 1995). As an ambassador or commissioned agent of Paul, the performer reading the letter *was* (the voice of) Paul. It may even be the case that the performer sought to “personify” Paul in his delivery of the letter (or considered it an advantage not to do so, *à la* Corinth!), so that it was as if Paul himself were right there. We can imagine that scenario best when the letter makes a personal appeal (Phlm and Gal 4:12–20) or when the performer is characterizing the grief or the joy (Phil), the sadness or the sacrifices that Paul has made on behalf of the recipients (I Thes and II Cor). Performers may have been responsible for elaborating on the letters, where needed, as they performed them. One commentator suggests that Paul’s letters may be notes for a performance. In any case, the performer would have been prepared to clarify the letter for the recipients after the performance was completed.

Letters were then likely told or read on other subsequent occasions to the same assembly (by other performers) and (copied and) passed on to be presented orally to Christian assemblies elsewhere. There the performers may have adapted the letters/ compositions to divergent audiences in different circumstances. Performers very familiar with Paul’s letters may account in part for the pseudonymous letters. A performer of Paul’s genuine letters may have composed Ephesians or Colossians, for example, as radical adaptations of the letters for new circumstances.

The Catholic Epistles were presented orally to many congregations over a wide area, again perhaps adapted somewhat to each new situation. The authors themselves may actually have anticipated such adaptations. In the epilogue of Revelation, John’s threatened curse against any change of wording in his prophecy (Rev 22:18–19) was no doubt addressed to a situation in which performers were likely expected to improvise on the text at hand. John’s warning was probably ignored! And the fact that all the letters that we have in the Second Testament were copied and preserved suggests that they attained widespread aural reception. The

Book of Revelation was penned to be performed widely (Barr). Revelation may have been performed as part of a liturgical event. If so, that composition would have been repeated often in the same locations. Because the letters embedded within Revelation were directed to “seven” churches—symbolic for all congregations in Asia Minor—it is likely that Revelation was performed before many different audiences. Again, written texts assisted in circulation. At the same time, because of the nature of performances, all these narratives, letters, and apocalypses may just as well have circulated orally, without the aid of a text, even after they were written down.

The point is this: oral performances were an integral and formative part of the oral cultures of early Christianity and the primary medium through which early Christians received and passed on the compositions now comprising the Second Testament. Thomas Boomershine has argued that it is “media anachronism” for us to interpret these texts in a written medium that is different from the oral medium in which they were first composed and performed (1989). Ever since the work of Marshall McLuhan, we have known that the medium is part of the message, if not the message itself. Studying these texts in an exclusively written medium has shaped, limited, and perhaps even distorted our understanding of them. Interpreting the Second Testament writings without taking account of the dynamics of oral performance can lead to misconceptions and misjudgments about their potential for meaning and their possible rhetorical effects. Taking oral performance into account may enable us to be more precise in our historical re-constructions and more faithful in our interpretations. Indeed, to study these texts now as oral compositions that were performed in an oral culture can potentially transform our experience of the writings of the Second Testament and our picture(s) of early Christianity.

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Oral performances were an integral and formative part of the oral cultures of early Christianity and the primary medium through which early Christians received and passed on the compositions now comprising the Second Testament.

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Such a medium shift will entail work in communications theory and media studies in order to clarify what happens when we make a paradigm shift from studying the Second

Testament strictly as writings to studying them as witnesses to performance in an oral culture. (Loubser 2006). As many have argued, there are some distinctive cognitive processes and different cultural dynamics that are generated by different media (Loubser 2002; 2006; Botha 2004; Olson; Ong 1986 1988; Tannen). In an oral culture, people may think with their feelings and remember with their bodies in a way that is somewhat different from the visual learning associated with print. Other insights should alert us to some of the paradigm shifts we need to be aware of when we study performance in an oral culture and experience performances as means of interpretation.

### **Clarifying the Object of Study: The Performance Event**

It will be helpful to clarify the object of study. By “performance event,” I mean to designate the whole complex dynamics of a performance in the ancient (and contemporary) world, including the following components: the act of performing; the “composition-in-performance;” the performer; the audience; the social location of performer and audience; the material context; the cultural/historical circumstances; and the rhetorical impact upon the audience. I am focusing here primarily on public performances for gathered groups (either a closed Christian group or an open occasion accessible to all), but I am also to a lesser extent including informal storytelling and the lively sharing of traditions by women and men in small group conversations and family settings.

In a performance, meaning is not words on a page as understood by a reader. Rather, meaning is in the whole event at the site of performance—sounds, sights, storytelling/speech, audience reaction, shared cultural beliefs and values, social location, and historical circumstances. One purpose of performance criticism is to ask: How do all these factors combine to suggest a range of meanings and potential rhetorical impacts? What follows in this section are several observations about each of the key components of the performance event.

#### *The Act of Performing*

The event of a performance is much more than the “oral” dimensions. In regard to performance, it is misleading to make a simple contrast between “written” and “oral,” because the category of “oral” is much too limiting to capture the dynamics of performing—as if performances involved only speaking. It is not as if the performer is a disembod-

ied voice that expresses only sound. It may well be that an audio recording is different from a written text, but this is not what performances were like. The performer is expressing composition in action: the movements, the gestures, the pace, the facial expressions, the postures, the movement of the mouth in forming speech, the spatial relationships of the imagined characters, the temporal development of the story in progressive events displayed on stage, and much more. Nor can we ignore the sheer force of the bodily presence of the performer to evoke emotions and commitments. Also, the performer's voice/body generates "seeing." As such, the act of hearing by the audience is in a sense also "visual," because speaking/hearing/acting stimulates the "imaginative seeing" in a vigorous way that is not replicated by silent reading or by sound alone. Consider how the author of the Book of Revelation wrote down what he "saw" so that the performer would en-act it in such a way that the audience too would "envision" it. So we need to talk about the holistic presentation of a performance by a performer to an audience and not just the sound of the speaking.

#### *The Composition-as-Performance*

The composition-as-performance is not a written text but an oral presentation. It is a living word, with a life of its own as distinct from its writing. The story is not on the page. It is in the mind and body of the performer. On the one hand, when the telling is fluid and free, the performance is not an interpretation of a written text; rather, it is a composition in its own right—an original composition or an oral re-composition of an earlier oral version or an oral version of a written composition. Performances will differ with each re-telling because the performer is different (even if the same person), because the audience is different (even if the same community), and because the context and circumstances are different.

On the other hand, even if the performance is a close telling of a written text (say, a letter of Paul by an emissary), it still has a life of its own as a performance. Each performance is a unique interpretation of that written text—"filled out" with tone, movement, bodily expressions, and so on. A contemporary memorized performance of a biblical text, for example, is an interpretation, just as a commentary or a monograph is an interpretation. It is an embodied interpretation. In this scenario, the text is off the page, and the events are in the imaginative enactment of the performer. As scholars who are also critics of performance, what categories/criteria might we develop as a basis to reflect upon and to critique performance as interpretation?

We cannot recover any of these myriad live performances among early Christians. Nevertheless, we have the "scripts" to analyze. The written compositions themselves give many explicit expressions reflecting and guiding the oral performance—such as volume ("screamed"), movement ("entered"), gestures ("touched"), facial expressions ("wept"), body movement ("looked up"), and so on. Many features of the text facilitate memory on the part of the performer as well as the audience. And the various storytelling and rhetorical patterns lead the audience to be changed by the experience. All of these, including the story/argument that is presented, bear on the nature of the performance and its power to transform. In analyzing the Second Testament writings for their orality, we have often focused on those distinctly "oral" traces of the composition. However, the whole piece was performed. Therefore, we have to seek to understand how every part and how the whole "worked" as a composition-in-performance. This is a great opportunity to take *what we do have*, namely, the Second Testament texts, and interpret them in a new medium.

In this regard, also the genre of a composition-in-performance will shape and limit the nature of the performance. For example, from my own performing, I have learned well the influence of genre on performance. Story genres with characters make demands on performers that are different from letters performed as speeches of rhetoric. Performing the fast-paced narrative of Mark is very different from performing the lengthy teaching sections in the Gospel of Matthew, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1–7:27) or the Woes on the Pharisees (Matt 23:1–39). Long narrative scenes from the Gospel of John are most like theater and lend themselves to a dialogue between two performers. The rhetorical genre of Paul's angry and passionate letter to the Galatians makes different demands on a performer than the reflective letter to the Philippians. The performance of James evokes the image of meditations by a sage who is examining gems of wisdom. The First Letter of Peter invites a tone of dissimulation as it seeks both to honor and to subvert human figures of authority. The apocalyptic genre of the Book of Revelation expresses intensely almost every emotion in the human repertoire as it excites the vivid imagination of the audience in warnings and with visions of horror and hope. The awareness of the way genre shaped performance—how it set up expectations, how it subverted them, how it was staged, what the audiences responses might have been—should surely be a factor in our interpretations of these writings in first century settings.

*The Performer*

The *performer* embodies the text. The performer is the *medium* that bears the potential meanings and impacts of the story upon the audience in a particular context. Every aspect of the performer's appearance, movements, and expressions are part of the story. 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. In this regard, the performer needed to be an entertainer. Unless the performer could captivate an audience and hold its attention, the performance and its power could be lost to them.

The performer is doing interpretation by placing him or herself in the position of the narrator and taking on the voice/persona of the composition and seeking to project the possible meaning(s) of that composition. By placing oneself in that position, the contemporary exegete-performer enters the world of the story or letter through a fresh medium, not as silent reader, nor as audience, but as the speaker of the composition. As the living medium, the interpreter becomes acutely aware of his or her bodily self and social location in ways not otherwise so apparent. Such dynamics also expose the power aspects of the relationship between performer and audience.

The early Christians had no un-embodied experience of the story. The performer, as medium, was always an integral dimension of the composition. As such, it was important that the audience trust the performer. On a personal level, the performer needed to embody the values, beliefs, and actions enjoined by the story/text being performed, because the performer was seeking to have the values and beliefs of the story embodied in turn in the actions and dynamics in the communal life of the audience. That may be one reason why there was a suspicion of writing in antiquity—because you could not really understand what the words meant apart from knowing the person telling them in a certain way! (Alexander 1990; Botha 1993b). An audience probably did not separate the story or the letter from a particular performer or from the social location of that performer. So unless the performer has integrity in relation to that which is being urged upon the audience, the audience would not receive the story or act on the letter being presented. Hence, the importance of the motif of imitation in relation to Paul's letters. Note, for example, how Paul would prefer that Timothy deliver (and therefore perform) his letter to the Philippians (although he had to settle for Epaphroditus), because Timothy was the only one who knew how to look out for the interests of others

instead of his own—which is the main theme of the Letter to the Philippians (2:19–30). Or imagine how incongruous it would have been for a wealthy person to perform the Letter of James. Consider any performance by someone whose social location is radically different from the content of the composition or of the social location of the audience. Perhaps the choice of Phoebe as a female to perform Romans was a brilliant move that avoided taking sides (despite her own ethnicity) in an agonistic struggle between male Judeans and male Gentiles that might have been exacerbated by a performer who was either a male Judean or a male Gentile.

Furthermore, not only integrity and social location but also knowledge gives authority to a performance. Unless the performer knows the audience—its culture and beliefs, its situation and needs—and addresses these circumstances with appropriateness, the audience will not give credence to the performance or to the contents of the performance.

*The Audience*

The *audience* is crucial to the meaning/impact of a performance. Meaning is negotiated between the performer, the composition, and the audience. We cannot separate audience from performer. They are in an interwoven, symbiotic relationship. In this sense, a performance event is the “site of interpretation.” A performance does not work until the audience works it out—irony, humor, riddles, catharsis, force of an argument, and so on. As such, a performance is an interactive event. My own experience with performing confirms this. When the audience laughs early on, I change the way I say later lines in order to evoke this response again.

Whitney Shiner argues that audiences of gospels and letters might have done such things as cheered, jeered, clapped, hooted, laughed, wept, gasped, shouted, heckled, given various verbal responses of acclamation and other forms of interruption. He even argues that one can identify “applause lines” in Mark that were designed to evoke positive acclamations. As such, compositions may have anticipated audience response and, in turn, audiences were quite capable of shaping a performance as it went along. It is difficult to know how to assess and re-construct this dynamic. Some letters of Paul may have anticipated negative audience response and were designed to counter it. Imagine, for example, how the diatribes in Romans would have worked as a performance with an audience.

It is crucial to remember that the audience is communal. Such an audience might collectively affirm or resist, cheer or jeer, stay or leave, with a variety of emotional and ideological

responses to the values, beliefs, arguments, and depictions presented. In the contemporary world, we have an almost completely individualistic experience of biblical writings, because we read or study them in private. Even when we hear them in a group, we tend to process them as individuals and not as a group. We need some communal experiences of these writings as performances in order to imagine the dynamics of “group response” to a performance.

The social location of the audience is, therefore, significant, because performance is shaped in part by the makeup and personality of the audience. In this regard, the performance will have different meanings for different audiences. What something means in one context with one audience will have a different meaning with a different audience in a different context. This has been illustrated for me often. I was amazed how the women prisoners of a local jail grasped James’ warning against the poison of the tongue. When I performed Mark to a medium security prison for men, the warning against what comes out from the heart—illegal sexual acts, theft, murder, expressions of greed, and so on (7:21-23)—took on new significance. Proclaiming the violence in Revelation against oppressors differs radically if the makeup of the audience is an oppressor group or an oppressed group. The Gospel of Luke sounds very different to the poor than it does to the rich. The importance of social location to meaning and response must have been as true also of ancient audiences, especially audiences from divergent cultures—a gentile audience compared to a Judean one or an audience in Asia Minor compared to one in Palestine or Rome or an urban audience in contrast to a rural audience.

At the same time, a single audience may have comprised people from diverse social locations. The thrust toward diversity in the early churches, such as the church at Corinth, assured this. So when we interpret a text as an oral composition, we are not necessarily dealing with an ideal hearer or a homogeneous audience but with multiple hearers in a communal audience. We see instances in the Second Testament where some members of an audience leave (John 6:60–71 and 8:59) or fall asleep (Acts 20:7–12) or threaten to kill (Luke 4:28–30; John 8:59) and where the composition reminds hearers to “Stay awake!” (Mark 13 and Revelation 16:15). Or consider how Paul’s Letter to Philemon affected in different ways Philemon, Onesimus, and the other members of the house church as they all experienced this letter together in a gathered community. The performance of a composition might divide an audience. Paul may have composed letters designed to generate division with an assembled audience, as, for example, when he wanted to exclude

the Judaizers from Galatia (Gal 1:6–9). Paul may also have composed letters to create unity among people from very different social locations, particularly, for example, in Corinth and Rome. Imagine how Paul composed and then had someone perform the Corinthian correspondence so as to retain the attention and increase the commitment of the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, and people with diverse theological/ethical perspectives. The unity of this community and its loyalty to Paul’s gospel were at stake in such complex rhetoric. It did not always work. Recall how Antoinette Wire re-constructed the suppressed voices of women prophets in Corinth who resisted Paul’s message—because, not able to break free of his own male/elite-retainer origins, Paul did not apply the gospel appropriately to their differing social location (1990). Imagining all these different letters being performed to gathered audiences that included both (or several) parties in a conflict helps to sharpen our understanding of what was at stake and what might have happened as a result of the performance. No doubt the Gospels also were composed with complex audiences in mind.

The composer or writer of every biblical work was probably well aware of the complex nature of their intended (and unintended) audiences. Certainly the performer was! I am acutely aware of the makeup of the audience when I perform. A performance is between one giver and many receivers. As such, the performer/ storyteller can imagine a range of implied audiences and may compose/perform to take account of that situation. We may do well to imagine how peasants and elites, slaves and masters, women and men, Pharisees and Sadducees, Judeans and Romans, as well as others in an audience might have experienced, say, Mark or I Peter—as a way of understanding their potential meanings and complex rhetoric. Peter Oakes at Manchester, England, has reported to me that he does an exercise with students in which he assigns a different social location to everyone, asks them to study it, and then discusses with them their reactions after they have heard the performance of a letter from the perspective of that social location. The multi-valence of a text and its rich potential for multiple valid meanings becomes quite obvious when we consider complex and diverse audiences (Cosgrove; Rhoads 2005).

#### *The Material Context*

The *material context* is important, because the “place” itself makes a difference in performance. Like genres, contexts raise expectations, in this case expectations of what does or does not happen in a particular place; as such, dif-

ferent places foster or inhibit certain audience responses. For me, it makes a difference in the audience response if I am performing in a church or a university or a theater or a prison or an open place. For example, people laugh more in secular settings compared to religious settings. In performing the passion narrative of Mark successively to different groups of inmates in a jail, I found myself orally retranslating the story with language they would best connect with their context—such as “bound over” for “handed over” and “perjury” for “false witness.” Location must have been significant also in regard to ancient settings for performance—such as in a synagogue or at a village market place or in an ancient theater or in a house or out in an open space between villages. How might performance criticism determine ways in which the location of a performance may have contributed to its meaning and reception?

### *The Socio-historical Circumstances*

The *socio-historical circumstances* also make a difference. Imagining specific socio-historical circumstances for a performance event intensifies our understanding of “reception.” For example, what danger might the Roman prisoner Paul have been inviting for the Philippians when he wrote a contra-imperial letter to a Christian community in this Roman military colony? How could performance criticism help us to imagine concrete scenarios for the audience reception of this letter in performance in the Philippian community? When I performed the Sermon on the Mount in a Latvian pulpit before the break-up of the Soviet Union (with KGB in the congregation), every word (such as “blessed are the meek” and “love your enemy”) took on new meanings. Likewise, imagining the performance and audience of Mark’s Gospel in a specific location (such as Galilee) in the immediate aftermath of the Roman Judean War of 66 to 70 CE. opens up new possibilities for interpreting the echoes of that war throughout the whole Gospel. When I performed the Book of Revelation after the 9/11 attack on the world trade center, the narration of merchants and sailors watching and grieving the burning of Rome portrayed in Revelation 18:9–18 took on fresh meaning and power. Similarly, first century Judean refugees of the Roman Judean War now in Asia Minor may have had the recent burning of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Roman Empire in mind when they were invited by the performer of Revelation to imagine the burning of Rome (Rev 18:9–18).

In understanding meaning and rhetoric in biblical performances in antiquity, we need to imagine differing audi-

ences under divergent circumstance—persecution, conflict, oppression, war, social unrest, poverty, prosperity, and so on—in specific locations hearing each composition in performance. True, we have been saying the same things about the crucial importance of context for interpreting the Second Testament as written documents. However, when we talk about the oral power of a composition *in performance to communal audiences in particular contexts*, we are now speaking in fresh ways about echoes and associations, about an enlivened imagination, about a richer meaning potential of a text, and about a greater intensity and immediacy of experience. To do so is to speak in fresh ways about a “politics of performance” (Ward 1995).

### *Rhetorical Effect/Impact*

The final factor in the dynamics of the performance event is the potential *rhetorical effect/impact* upon an audience. By rhetoric, I mean the impact of the entire composition-as-performance. In performance, there is no separating form and function, content and rhetoric, story and discourse, meaning and impact. The whole experience of performance integrates what a text means as it is embodied in the presentation received by the audience. In general, meaning has to do with ideas, beliefs and values; however, in performance, meaning is to be interpreted in terms of relationship—the performer seeking to transform an audience with a story or speech and/or to impel them to action.

Here, then, we are not just talking about tradents passing on a tradition in some neutral way because, given the nature of the Second Testament texts, the rhetoric of a performance seeks to change the world, shape communities, generate something new, evoke the power of the Spirit. Hence, we need to imagine that the rhetorical impact takes place not only in the immediate responses of the audience during the performance, but also in the attitudinal, behavioral, and relational changes that may have taken place subsequently in the community as a result of the performance. The transformation that takes place in the community, in some sense, itself constitutes an interpretation! As such, with performance, we ask in fresh ways not only what a composition *means* but also what it *does* in performance. What is the impact of a performance in terms of persuasion—subversion of cultural values, transformation of worldview, impulse to action, change of behavior, emotional effect, ethical commitment, intellectual insight, political perspective, re-formation of community, the generation of a new world? Put another way, what does a story or a letter lead the audience to be-

come—such that they are different people in the course of and as a result of experiencing the performance? Also, as an oral composition-in-performance, *how* does it have its impact? How exactly, for example, does the Gospel of John as composition-in-performance not just lead people to believe in Jesus but also evoke in the audience the actual experience of eternal life?

## Conclusion

From all these elements of the performance event, we can develop “audience scenarios” as a basis for interpretation (cf. Malina). The question for performance criticism is this: How can we find rigorous ways to analyze all these elements of the performance event together so as to transform the ways we interpret the written texts we have before us and the ways we configure our image of the early church? In Part 2, I will discuss the various methodologies of performance criticism and suggest contemporary performance itself as a means to develop our sensitivities to performances in the oral cultures of early Christianity.

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