

***Putting On The Word:
Using Performance to Teach OT Narratives***
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In the spring of 2007, Dr. Tom Boogaart changed the way I approached teaching OT narratives. At the time I was an M.Div student and Western Theological Seminary (WTS), and also a TA for his Introduction to Biblical Hebrew class. I signed up for his Hebrew Reading course, expecting it to involve weekly translation, oral reading practice, and theological/exegetical conversations about the texts we translated. We ended up doing a lot of the latter, but none of the former. Instead of weekly translation, Tom told us to *memorize* portions of Jonah 1 each week.

We spent the first several weeks of the semester working out the memorization together as a class. After we had the whole chapter memorized we began to develop an ensemble performance of Jonah 1, each of us taking on the role of a different character in the drama. None of us had ever done this with the Hebrew text before, and so we were all learning together by trial and error. By the end of the semester my perspective on and understanding of the book of Jonah had been completely transformed, and we had received invitations to perform Jonah 1 – in Hebrew! – in local churches, and even fundraising dinners for local para-church organizations. I was hooked on the power of performance to unlock the biblical text, and facilitate a transformational encounter with the biblical text – not just for me as an individual, but for all of us as a group of performers, and the audience as well.

Two years later I was working on a ThM degree, also at WTS, studying performance criticism. Tom gave me the Hebrew Reading class he had developed as a way to ground my research while also giving me a workshop to explore and play with the method. I have now taught that course several times; we have performed texts from the Pentateuch, the Former Prophets, and the Psalms, and have discovered much about Scripture, ourselves, and each other along the way.

I will describe the basic method I employ in this class first, then I will offer some reflections on the impact this method has had on the classroom environment and on the students in their pastoral formation.

First, the method, or pedagogy I employ in the class. The class is built on the following premises: the narratives in the Old Testament a) were transmitted for many generations in oral form (even if some existed in written form), b) the stories would have been told, and therefore performed in some way, c) the primary way the stories would have been experienced was by hearing the story told, and seeing it unfold in space and time, d) even after the stories were formalized into the written form they come to us in today their oral

character was not lost, but remained, e) and finally, new meanings may be made accessible to us as interpreters if we approach the narratives in a medium that prioritizes their inherent orality.

In order to experience the narratives in a truly oral context, each student in the class, as well as the instructor, must commit the entire narrative¹ to memory in its original language.² The stewards of Israel's tradition would not have read the story aloud from a scroll, but would have *recited* it from memory. The act of internalization fundamentally changes one's relationship to the text, making it a living document, giving it subjectivity and power. Further, when it is memorized (or, in Tom Boomershine's phrase, "learned by heart"), the interpreter is able to hold the beginning, middle, and end of the drama in their mind simultaneously, and is able to intuit the faithfulness of interpretations that may seem legitimate for a portion of the story, but violate some element of another portion.

In the context of our seminary, an evangelical and ecumenical institution in the reformed tradition, the formation of a theological and pastoral imagination is very important to our work as a faculty. The task of scripture memorization in this course, therefore, is framed by the imperative ascribed to Moses in Deuteronomy 6, known as the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you will love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your life, and with all of your might. *Let these words that I am commanding you today be on your hearts*" (v. 4-6). According to the logic of these verses, God's oneness or lack of internal division toward Israel compels Israel to respond in kind, with a singular (all...all...all) love of its own back to God. The capacity to do so is created and sustained through holding God's words in our hearts. Memorizing scripture is understood as an act of love, an act that empowers the student/disciple/interpreter to love God and neighbor. As Jeff Barker has said, you can't faithfully perform a script if you don't love it first.

The specific way in which we memorize the chosen story is designed intentionally to infuse the classroom with an ethos of play. I am convinced that appropriate amounts of playfulness in a classroom exponentially increase students' internal motivation to study and learn, and it increases the potential of a meaningful and authentic community being formed within the walls of the classroom (which, for this class, is the newly renovated Mulder Chapel).

I provide audio and video files of the verses the students are to memorize each week on the seminary's learning management software, which facilitates our curriculum online. The audio files are simply recordings of me reading the passage. Each track is a single verse. The

1. This explanation speaks only to using performance with narratives, but I have explored performance with the Psalms on two occasions to wonderful effect (Psalm 113 and 130).

2. It is not imperative to learn the text in its original language, and I have used performance to good effect in translation. The course I teach is a Hebrew exegesis course, and so our encounter with the narrative is primarily through the Hebrew language.

video files are also each a single verse. On them I recite the passage, but include hand (and sometimes whole body) motions that illustrate some element of the meaning of the word as it is spoken. Some of these motions are taken from ASL (American Sign Language), and others I simply make up. I always give my students the freedom to tweak or change the hand motions during class, which often leads to the creation of very fun inside jokes.³ I have found that students are not able to handle memorizing much more than two to three verses of Hebrew a week, particularly after a few weeks of accumulation.

During class we devote a lot of time to working through the constantly growing memorized section together. I tell them I expect them to come to class "comfortably familiar" with the passage, and "able to rattle it off" by the end of class. Students have spent the week translating the week's verses as well, which makes memorizing them a bit easier. We begin with some whole body warm ups to loosen our bodies and also "break the ice" a bit. Some students are uncomfortable in their bodies, and so we spend time getting in tune with our bodies, and also being foolish together so as to help everyone not take themselves so seriously. I selected a few of the exercises included in Richard Swanson's *Provoking the Gospel*.⁴

After warming up we begin working through the text. I say a short section with hand motions, and they all reply. The further on we get into the semester the less we do call/response because we are doing a lot of review. When the students seem to have a surface grasp of the passage, I switch to a modified theatre game we call Zip Zap Zog.⁵ The object of this game is to begin to learn the passage well enough to say it in portions as opposed to straight through. It is much easier to recite the passage from beginning to end than it is to pick up where someone else left off, then leave off where the next person is supposed to pick up. However, group performance requires you to only speak your own parts.

This exercise begins to move the passage from the head to the heart. One person begins by reciting the opening clause, and I invite everyone to do the hand motions altogether. When this person has finished the section they have chosen to recite, they jump in the air, clap their hands, and point to the next person who will recite, who must recover from this distraction and locate the place in the text where the previous person stopped. We do this several times through. I should note, however, that some students are more comfortable

3. For example, several years ago we were doing the story of the Bands of Aram in 2 Kings 6.8-23. When the king of Aram's army surrounded Elisha at Dothan, and his servant woke up to discover this terrible predicament, the narrator declares that he saw the whole army "and horses and chariots" (וְסוּסִים וְרֶכֶב). During one class period we laughed for several minutes after coming up with almost a dance routine to say "horses and chariots" involving us jumping while pretending to goad a horse we were "riding," then jumping while pretending to goad a horse pulling our "chariot." We usually lost our place immediately following this "dance" because we were all laughing.

4. Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel: Methods to Embody Biblical Storytelling Through Drama* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004).

5. This was introduced to me by a former student, Megan Hodgkin, who learned it from Jeff Barker, I believe, during her undergraduate theatre work at Northwestern College in Orange City, IA.

doing this than others, and it is of utmost importance to invite students to be playful, but not to make them uncomfortable or coerced. I do not give students a hard time for simply pointing to the person they choose to follow them. It is necessary for each member to feel accepted as they are, and not to force everyone to be an excitable extrovert.

After a few weeks of spending all of our time memorizing together, students begin to make presentations. I assign a couple of verses to each student and have them spend time in critical commentaries to provide historical, cultural, literary, and rhetorical context to our engagement with the passage. Each presentation concludes with the student offering their own analysis of how these insights may contribute to or be expressed in performance. E.g., How might the architecture of our performance space facilitate the experience of a reversal of power? How might we demonstrate the power dynamic at work between Aram and Israel? How could we represent spatially the contrast being made between God's particularity and ubiquity here? These presentations inevitably spark very helpful conversation about the passage itself, and begin to turn our minds toward imaginative visions of how this particular text might look when performed.

Slowly, then, we transition away from group memory work to what I call embodied exegesis. Using our bodies and voices and the performance space, we begin to exegete the text. For many, performance criticism evokes a performance of a narrative that is akin to storytelling: a single storyteller voices the story in time and space. As Tom Boogaart, Jeff Barker, and I have employed it, the performance is done by an ensemble cast who each take a part. What an ensemble performance makes possible is a more complicated and generative use of the performance space. For instance, in our performance of the Widow's Oil in 2 Kings 4.1-7, the debt collector (representing death) looms large on one end of the stage and Elisha (representing life) takes his stand at the other end of the stage while the vulnerable woman and her two children fill the empty space between them, caught in the cross hairs of death and life. The tension in the drama relates to the conflict between life and death, and whether the grace of God is sufficient in the face of devastating loss. When Elisha speaks the drama's closing words, "...you and your children can *live* on what is leftover", the debt collector has already exited the stage and Elisha joins the woman and her children center stage to demonstrate conclusively the victory of life over death. This kind of staging would be impossible without multiple actors involved.

Throughout this stage of the course I implement what is called the "Seven Minute Rule", which states that we cannot spend more than seven minutes at one time discussing an interpretation of the passage. These conversations inevitably revolve around enacting a scene this way or that way, the benefits or drawbacks of each, and what would be communicated in each possibility. The Seven Minute Rule requires that we put a stop to the endless discussion and actually try each suggested possibility out. This forces us to regularly "enter" the text and will commonly lead to other insights and discoveries which would not have been made if we had simply sat around and talked the text to death.

Like all good drama, this course builds to a climax. The climax is a public performance of the story, which is offered to the WTS community during a morning chapel service. Our seminary has chapel every morning, and on Fridays we partake of Communion together. Friday chapels are led by faculty, the rest of the week's services are planned and led by students. Most of our performances occur on the morning of the chapel I am scheduled to lead. This reality has led to two insights.

First, the context (you might say, *Sitz em Leben*) of the performance event plays a critical role in the development of the performance. That the service is a Communion service transforms our interpretation of the passage and generally leads us to include the Table in the performance in some way or another. I strongly discourage my students from "finding Jesus under every rock" in the Old Testament, favoring instead an approach akin to Ellen Davis' that appreciates the Old Testament story on its own right with great care, and then allows the text itself to point to fulfillment in Christ. We do not spend time searching for the presence of Jesus in the drama. However, the deeper we penetrate the layers of meaning in the story, the more likely we are to discover the Gospel at its core. A powerful example of this happened when we performed Exodus 17.1-7, the first "water from the rock" narrative. God is a character in this drama; God speaks, walks, and miraculously produces water, so we had a student play the role of God. In v. 6 God tells Moses that he will "stand over there on the rock of Horeb. Strike the rock." When we went to play the scene we discovered that, if God is standing on the rock, and Moses strikes the rock, Moses' staff has to get through God to reach the rock.⁶ In essence, God is telling Moses to strike *God*.⁷ This text anticipates the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and suggests that what God did in Jesus on the cross was not fundamentally new, but the ultimate expression of the love God has always displayed for his people and the world. We could not have seen this without *seeing* it. This Lenten performance led us directly to the Table.

The second insight I have gained from working toward a public performance is the critical and interpretive role played by the very architecture of the space the performance will be held in. The performance space creates interpretive possibilities and places certain limits on what is possible. The presence or absence of a balcony creates the possibility of a character ascending or descending, or perhaps facilitates the discovery of a vertical axis latent in the script. One year I assigned a performance group a very large empty square room to use in preparing a performance of Jonah 1. Immediately outside this space was a lobby with a stairway (without walls on either side) that rose to a balcony outside some seminary offices.

6. The Hebrew preposition is על, which could mean "on" or "before." Depending on the size of the rock, either translation would result in the same discovery. We generally do not use props, and so there was no actual rock on the stage.

7. For a fuller treatment of this text and our performance, see Travis West, "Unseen Grace: Lent in the Book of Exodus," **FINISH FOOTNOTE**

The students abandoned the big square in favor of the lobby because it allowed God to look down upon the flight of Jonah, but also to enter and leave the "earth" space at will. This, further, led the student playing the part of God to reflect on the sadness and loneliness God perhaps felt in response to Jonah's flight, simply because she felt lonely and sad up on the balcony all by herself watching the chaos unfold beneath her during rehearsal. Other groups working on the same story in different spaces had very different interpretations—not any more or less faithful, just different—than this group, in part because the space they worked in led them to different insights and possibilities.

The worship service is planned around the performance, and the dominant themes we have discovered are expressed in song and prayer and liturgy throughout. The performance is done in Hebrew, but we always read the passage first in a translation we have developed specifically for performance. If there is ample time, we may have the actors set up tableaux of several scenes from the performance so that the congregation can associate spacing and characters with language they understand. We have found that even though they do not understand the language, there is some power or wonder evoked by hearing the story in its original language, most people prefer the Hebrew performance, even when we are able to do complete performances in both Hebrew and English.

In closing I would like to briefly share a few things I have noticed that this way of engaging biblical texts facilitates a certain kind of classroom culture, and also how it has formed students.

Students regularly tell me how refreshing it is to spend 14 weeks on a single passage of Scripture, no longer than 15 verses in length (it is hard to memorize more than 15 verses of Hebrew while putting together a performance in 14 weeks while taking several other courses). This is very intentional on my part. I believe that the best way to transform someone's relationship with scripture is to invite them into a transformational encounter with it, as opposed to filling their head with information about it. Information certainly leads to transformation, but the power of story is in the telling and hearing, not in knowing all the critical facts about it. Slowing down and reducing the workload creates space for transformation.

The Spirit empowers Scripture to form community around itself. My favorite part of this class every year is the fun we have together as a class. Real friendships are made or deepened as we together enter the story of Scripture.

Collaboration, when done well, multiplies creativity and insight. Most of the seminal insights we have discovered in these dramas over the years have come from the collective efforts of many. Very seldom have I simply sat down and produced an interesting insight on my own. Rather, as we ask questions of the text together, each student brings the wealth of their own experience and knowledge to bear on the task, and the total is greater than the

sum of its parts.