

PREFACE

IN THE WORLD OF BIBLICAL STUDIES, PERFORMANCE CRITICISM is a proverbial new kid on the block. This is not to suggest that performance criticism developed *ex nihilo*. Performance criticism is indebted to various hermeneutical trajectories spawned over the last two hundred years. But performance criticism is an emerging discipline in that it attempts to account for the dynamics of the biblical texts within an oral/aural environment.¹ Since the inception of critical scholarship, biblical interpretation has been governed by literary methodologies that have largely ignored and/or neglected the oral milieu in which the biblical texts arose, and it is only recently that scholars have begun to explore the media context that shaped the composition, transmission, performance, and reception of the biblical texts. Although performance critics are concerned to understand how the biblical texts were received in an environment where illiteracy was high and orality the norm, such an endeavor is neither clear-cut nor simple. Probing beyond the literary artifacts is a daunting task, particularly when the codified texts are all that remain. Yet, despite the challenges, performance critics are concerned to situate the biblical texts within their ancient context. To neglect the social and communicative media is to ignore a crucial component of the interpretive process. If “the medium is the message,”² then appreciating the impact of orality deserves more focused attention in biblical studies.

Like all new endeavors and methodologies, the task facing performance critics is not only to articulate *what* is performance criticism, but *why* it makes an interpretive difference. This collection of essays, by leading scholars in the field of performance criticism, seeks to advance the conversation while addressing both questions. More specifically, the volume engages

1. On performance criticism as an emerging discipline, see Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Temple Studies—Part I,” 118–33; Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Temple Studies—Part II,” 164–84.

2. This famous aphorism was coined by McLuhan (*Understanding Media*).

in dialogue with narrative criticism—one of the main literary approaches employed by biblical scholars over the last thirty years. The engagement is not intended to diminish or express a lack of appreciation for the various narrative-critical studies that have provided insight into ancient storytelling practices (indeed many performance critics began their work as narrative critics!). Rather by exploring selected features of biblical narratives, both at the theoretical and exegetical levels, it is hoped that a more discernible picture will begin to emerge as to how performance criticism illuminates the biblical texts. Collectively, these essays reflect upon the hermeneutical shift taking place in the field of biblical studies and provide detailed examples from the Gospels in order to demonstrate how performance critics are attempting to navigate these uncharted waters.

Of course, a volume of this nature could never have been completed without a host of contributors, whose expertise and insight were matched only by their commitment to the project. Their enthusiasm throughout the process was a constant encouragement, and their perseverance along the way ensured the timely publication of the volume. As well, special thanks goes to Mike Whinton and Jeremiah Bailey, doctoral students at Baylor University, who graciously assisted in the copyediting of the volume. Collectively, their careful review was of invaluable assistance during the final stages of the project. To these, and certainly many more along the way, I owe a debt of gratitude.

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