

# PERFORMANCE CRITICISM

## *A Paradigm Shift in New Testament Studies*

*David Rhoads and Joanna Dewey*

BIBLICAL PERFORMANCE CRITICISM IS THE STUDY OF THE BIBLICAL writings as oral performances told from memory or sometimes as prepared readings in performance events before communal audiences in a predominantly oral culture. It is our conviction that this way of thinking about biblical writings represents a paradigm shift in biblical studies. Our focus here is on the significance of performance criticism for study of the New Testament writings in the first and early second centuries.

The paradigm shift comes as a result of our recognition of the first-century biblical worlds as cultures in which orality and memory predominated over writing. Performance criticism as a method is one way to focus the dynamics of orality, memory, and writing so that this paradigm shift is clear and explicit. Performance criticism represents a foundational change in communication media from print to speech, a shift from treating biblical writings as modern printed texts toward treating them as scripts and *aides memoires* for oral performance in antiquity. This shift refocuses the object of study toward the orality of early Christianity, toward memory as the primary repository of tradition, toward writing as ancillary to orality and memory,

and toward performance events of New Testament texts. This shift challenges us to reframe our image of early Christianity and to recast and expand the methodological tools we scholars use in New Testament studies.

Orality criticism in New Testament studies began in the early 1980s with the work of two scholars, Werner Kelber and Thomas Boomershine. Of course, there were studies related to the oral nature of early Christianity before that time, most viewing orality as a temporary stage leading to the written texts. These two scholars, however, made oral dynamics central to early Christianity and the New Testament writings; and both understood that they were advocating for a profound media shift for the study of the New Testament. Kelber came to this shift through theory and orality studies, along with fresh exegesis of selected early Christian texts. Boomershine came to it through narrative exegesis and storytelling performances. Around the same time, Boomershine was instrumental in the formation of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media section of the Society of Biblical Literature, and Kelber was an influential early contributor to the group. As these and other scholars grappled with the media world of ancient Christianity, we have come to recognize the importance of memory as the primary bearer of tradition, such that writing did not replace memory; writing supported memory. Performance criticism builds on these studies of orality and memory, adding a focus on performance events. In a predominately oral culture, performance involves a performer performing orally to a particular communal audience in a particular cultural ethos and a concrete historical context at some specific point in time.

## Paradigms Shifts in Science

To understand the nature of paradigm shifts more clearly, we have turned to the classic study by Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.<sup>1</sup> We do not, of course, think of biblical studies as a scientific discipline. However, understanding the way science has developed provides a useful analogy to illuminate methodological developments in the history of biblical studies. Kuhn argues that major changes in scientific methodology have come about less through linear development of one new discovery or methodology added to what preceded and more by paradigm shifts, the old paradigm being inadequate to account for new developments or discoveries.<sup>2</sup> Kuhn cites as examples the work of Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein. Such developments involved the abandonment of one paradigm

1. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.
2. *Ibid.*, 2, 6, 138, 140.

and the adoption of a new one with a new set of perceptions, a new set of commitments, and, generally, a new set of methods. They are “revolutions.”

What Kuhn calls “normal science” involves applying accepted paradigms and current methods to confirm expected outcomes and to solve puzzles without looking for the novel or the unexpected.<sup>3</sup> It is not oriented toward innovative developments. Many advances in normal science do indeed come through an accumulation of discoveries as brick by brick a scientific house is built. In such cases, the basic paradigm is adjusted to accommodate the new developments.

By contrast, the first step in a scientific revolution involving a paradigm shift may be the awareness by one or more scientists of an anomaly, a factor that current methods cannot account for.<sup>4</sup> Examples are the use of x-rays or the identification of oxygen, which came about through the occurrence of anomalies.<sup>5</sup> Such anomalies resulted in a new perception of things—not an expansion or adjustment of current paradigms, but a fresh way of looking at things. Therefore, the revolutionary shift involves the eventual loss or abandonment of the old paradigm and the embrace of another.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, the old and new paradigms continue to be used alongside each other. Sometimes, the old paradigm is radically revised to incorporate the new paradigm. In other cases, the old may be incorporated into the new more encompassing paradigm. Most commonly the new paradigm replaces the old one.

The process of transition to a new paradigm takes time.<sup>7</sup> There is a period needed to rethink and retool.<sup>8</sup> The initial efforts to formulate a new paradigm may be problematic and need further refinement.<sup>9</sup> Resistance is often strong because the new paradigm usually stands in opposition to deeply held commitments and expectations.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, gradually, more and more scientists come to embrace the new paradigm as more adequate and eventually abandon the old paradigm.<sup>11</sup> As time passes, most of the scientific field comes to see the new paradigm as the new normal.

One crucial aspect of a paradigm shift is a change in perception. People look at the same phenomena and see them radically differently.

3. *Ibid.*, 109, 175, 34–35, 52.

4. *Ibid.*, 52, 96.

5. *Ibid.*, 92.

6. *Ibid.*, 66, 77, 98.

7. *Ibid.*, 86, 144.

8. *Ibid.*, 76.

9. *Ibid.*, 156.

10. *Ibid.*, 59, 62–65, 149.

11. *Ibid.*, 152, 158.

Pre-Copernican scientists looked at Earth as immovable, with the sun and moon as planets rotating around Earth. Copernican scientists saw Earth moving around the sun, and the moon as a satellite of Earth.<sup>12</sup> The change in perception is tantamount to a fundamental change in worldview. Similarly, the shift from Newton's way of seeing the world to Einstein's way of seeing the world resulted in a radical shift in perspective. The same could be said in biology of Darwin's theory of evolution. Kuhn speaks of these shifts in perception as "conversions of perspective,"<sup>13</sup> "transformations in vision,"<sup>14</sup> and "gestalt switches."<sup>15</sup> Since we do not see the world piecemeal, these fundamental shifts become a "new world."<sup>16</sup>

The model for scientific revolutions put forth by Kuhn is a generic model meant to enable us to see the nature of such events more clearly. The actual situation may be more complex than the model suggests, but as a heuristic device offering a dynamic explanation, the model is quite illuminating and helpful. It can also shed light on transformations in biblical studies.

## Paradigm Shifts in Biblical Studies

We can use Kuhn's model to look at points in biblical studies that may be considered paradigm shifts involving revolutions in perception and method. Surely the onset of the historical-critical method in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would qualify: generally speaking, the shift was from uncritical acceptance of the historicity of the Gospel materials to radical questioning of them. Instead of conflating all four Gospels into one supposedly historical whole, scholars used the critical methods of the Enlightenment to ask how the Gospels related to each other and how that knowledge could help to trace back to what really happened in the life of Jesus. The consequent development of source criticism and the attendant flourishing of lives of Jesus in the nineteenth century represented a revolution in the approach to the Bible as compared to what went before. This shift involved a fundamental change in perspective about the nature and status of the texts themselves.

Problems became apparent in the application of this new historical-critical paradigm. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* exposed the fact that biographers of

12. Ibid., 114–15.

13. Ibid., 113.

14. Ibid., 111.

15. Ibid., 117.

16. Ibid., 6, 128, 150.

Jesus had failed to carry out the mandate, that their portraits were anachronistic, and that efforts to write biographies of Jesus were not defensible because they reflected the nineteenth century as much as or more than the first century.<sup>17</sup> Schweitzer's elevation of apocalyptic as a prominent (and, to the nineteenth century, anomalous) dimension of Jesus' life and teaching, which made Jesus a strange and irrelevant figure, put the quest for the historical Jesus on hold for almost half a century while New Testament scholars developed new methodological tools for better historical reconstruction.

The advent of form criticism in the first half of the twentieth century followed by redaction criticism in midcentury did not constitute a paradigm shift in biblical method but rather important additive developments. Form criticism and redaction criticism developed the same basic source-critical paradigm of analyzing layers of the Gospel traditions in search of history. Both form and redaction criticism were designed to reconstruct history—the historical Jesus, the history of the earliest church, and the history of the evangelists' communities. In other words, New Testament scholars sought to address the historical problems exposed by Schweitzer by refining and expanding the existing paradigm of the historical-critical method with new methodological tools, still with the aim of historical reconstruction.

In the late 1970s, however, the onset of narrative criticism set in motion a revolutionary paradigm shift in the perception of the status and purpose of the texts themselves. Instead of dissecting a Gospel text into layers of tradition and redaction in order to reconstruct history, a group of scholars began to look at the text as a story and saw the final product as a relatively holistic narrative designed to have a powerful impact upon readers. Narrative criticism was quickly expanded to include reader-response criticism and other forms of literary criticism. Historical-critical scholars looked at a Gospel, the Gospel of Mark for example, and saw layers by means of which they could view the historical Jesus, the early church, and the community of the evangelist. By contrast, narrative-critical scholars looked at Mark and saw it as a story best understood by studying the settings, characters, and events of an imaginative "narrative world." This was a shift from looking behind the text for its origins to looking at the text for what impact it might have on recipients and how it might be received: a shift from viewing the text as window to the history behind it to viewing the text as portrait to be viewed and interpreted in front of it. A parallel development took place in the analysis of New Testament letters—a shift from the focus on how they were composed to a focus on the rhetorical impact of a letter on a community.

17. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

It took a while for scholars to adjust to this new paradigm. Nevertheless, in the last several decades, narrative criticism has achieved normative status as a New Testament discipline. The historical-critical paradigm, however, continues to be used alongside the new narrative paradigm. The two paradigms address different questions: the one on the prehistory of a document and the other on the impact of the writing as a whole upon an early Christian community. Some scholars find both approaches useful, particularly in writing commentaries. These two radically different perspectives on the status and purpose of New Testament texts both continue to be useful.

Additional methodological advances have occurred in the last decades. Historical criticism has been expanded, even transformed, through the use of models from cultural anthropology. These models have illuminated our understanding of gender roles, kinship, ancient economies, dynamics of purity and defilement, and much more. Also, instead of viewing Christianity in relation to Judaism alone and considering the early churches as politically innocuous in relation to the Roman Empire, a number of scholars now view many of the New Testament writings as standing in opposition to the ideology and organizational dynamics of the Roman Empire. Far from being politically quiescent, early Christianity presented counterimperial ideologies and organized countercultural communities as alternative life-worlds to the realities of the Roman Empire. These two shifts have greatly enriched New Testament studies, but they are not fundamental paradigm shifts. Rather, they expand and enrich the historical and literary paradigms, much as form and redaction criticism earlier expanded the work of source critics.

More foundational than these additional methodologies has been the challenge to scholars' fundamental assumptions of objectivity in the historical and literary enterprises of biblical studies. As long as New Testament scholarship was the domain of educated European and American white males, the illusion of scholarly objectivity could be maintained. The influx of women, minorities, Third World critics, and others into biblical studies—along with the development of theories of postmodernism—showed that scholarly neutral objectivity was indeed an illusion. This has been a paradigm shift that represents a change in perception about the nature and status of the texts—a shift from seeing the text as something that could be studied objectively (with many interpreters coming to the same conclusion) to realizing that the text has meaning only in relation to those who read it, and seeing that those who read the text come to it with very different perspectives and interests. Such a shift served to relativize the dominant interpretations and lift up the pluriformity of texts and interpretations. Post-modern approaches have dismantled our scholarly claims to objectivity and

have affirmed the relative and situated nature of all interpretation. Fresh and insightful interpretations by feminists, womanists, other liberation exegetes of many kinds, and postcolonial critics have all shown how much the social location of readers shapes their interpretations and their appropriations of the biblical materials. There are no disinterested observers and no neutral interpretations; all interpreters are located and invested.

Furthermore, power dynamics exist between text and interpreter and between interpreters that should leave no one naïve about the potentially oppressive nature of interpretation *and* of the Bible itself. This revolutionary postmodern paradigm shift in New Testament studies is leading many interpreters to name their social location, to interpret self-consciously from their social location, to do so in dialogue with the interpretations of others from diverse social locations, and to illuminate or counter the ways in which the work of biblical scholars and/or the Bible itself can be oppressive.

This paradigm shift is not one that can exist alongside the earlier modernist paradigms, except insofar as the older paradigms are modified to encompass the new. Rather, the new paradigm replaces earlier hermeneutical claims to detached objectivity and to the notion of a single correct interpretation of a writing or to one correct historical reconstruction of persons and events.

## Performance Criticism as a Paradigm Shift

We are convinced that New Testament studies (and biblical studies generally) is now facing another paradigm shift in the way we view early Christianity and in the methods we use to study the biblical texts. This is a shift from a focus on the New Testament *as writings* on the model of modern printed texts to a focus on orality and memory, a focus on texts as witnesses to *oral performances*. This paradigm shift represents a foundational change of medium (from written to oral and from writing to memory), a change that reorients our understanding of the purpose and status of the texts themselves. This new paradigm challenges the ways we view the New Testament writings and early Christianity with our print model mentality. The replacement will focus on the oral ethos, the predominance of memory, the generally subsidiary nature of scrolls—all coming together in performance events that reflect the collective memory of a community and that shape its social identity.

It is important to observe that we are not setting up an oral/written divide or a binary opposition but a model that encompasses interrelationships of speech, memory, and sometimes writing. We are advocating a major shift in gravity to a focus on orality, memory, and writing that are actualized

in performances. When we perceive the same New Testament texts from a performance vantage point, everything changes. An historical or narrative critic may look at a New Testament work and imagine a fixed text written by an author and read by readers. A performance critic will look at the text and imagine how it may reflect oral performances done from memory before particular early Christian communities. Simply put, based on this new perspective, the writings we have that are preserved in the New Testament are examples of performance literature: that is, literature that was meant for performance and that may well have taken shape during many prior oral performances.

In 1974, Hans Frei lamented the “eclipse of biblical narrative,” the loss of the power of biblical story in favor of a fragmentation of the text into sources for historical reconstruction or in favor of abstractions into doctrinal formulations and ethical lessons.<sup>18</sup> Through the new paradigm of narrative criticism, biblical scholarship has come a long way toward recovering the narrative dynamics and the rhetorical force of the biblical materials as standard New Testament practice. Therefore, much scholarly work now takes for granted the surface meaning and impact of the text as we have it, either as written narrative or as epistolary rhetoric.

Now we are addressing another threshold; we are becoming aware of the “eclipse of biblical performance”—the centuries-long loss of the immediacy and power of the Gospels and letters performed orally and in their entirety, as they were experienced in the early churches of the first centuries. Studies are now emerging to redress this loss. We are at the beginning of this process; yet already the various efforts seem to be coalescing into a discipline that may be called *performance criticism*.

### *The Old Paradigms Assumed the Print Model*

Although we have long viewed the early church as part of a predominately oral culture and understood that traditions circulated orally, nevertheless, it has had little impact on our research or our methods. Biblical scholars have studied the literature of the New Testament for centuries without ever hearing them performed as stories or speeches or epistolary orations, without taking sound into account as an essential ingredient of interpretation, without trying to determine how they may have been performed in early Christian communities, and without constructing ancient performance scenarios as a basis for interpretation. It is difficult to imagine musicologists studying scores of music without ever hearing a performance. Nor can we imagine

18. Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.



theater scholars studying scripts of ancient drama without having seen contemporary performances of the plays and without trying to determine how they may have been performed and experienced in ancient times. Yet we biblical scholars have done precisely that with the performance literature that is the New Testament. Even when we have heard them read aloud as straight readings, such as in the context of worship, our experience has been of short passages and not of the work as a whole.

Traditionally, then, we have assumed that ancient manuscripts functioned as our own modern printed texts function. We have worked out of a model for print medium that is based on the way we experience the biblical writings in the modern world. In so doing, we have assumed a similar centrality and the authority of writings in antiquity. A print model might look like this:

Author ——— Written Text ——— Individual Silent Reader

Using the print model in our study of first-century writings, we have consistently spoken of the authors as writers and the recipients as readers. We have assumed that the author composed in the act of writing and produced a document that was meant to be fixed. We have treated the texts as fixed and stable (as one would expect to find in print), and we have sought to reconstruct this original text—what the author wrote—from extant variants considered to be corruptions of the original. We have viewed the texts as documents to be read silently without regard to their sound or to their embodiment by those who performed them, to be read at a time separate from and later than the act in which they were composed. Our scholarly interpretations reflect our modern experience of these texts as individual readers who study texts in silence and alone in private.

Given our assumptions based on our experience of print, we have considered the New Testament writings central to the life of the early church. True enough, we have traditionally acknowledged that a public reader would read a letter or Gospel aloud to a gathered audience. We have imagined, however, that such an oral presentation to an ancient community was a straightforward reading of what was written and therefore faithful to the text as silent text. We have assumed that writing was the dominant component while an oral presentation was peripheral and added little if anything to it. Therefore, the written text was all we needed. Based on these assumptions, we already know all that we need to know for interpreting the text. We do not need to imagine or to study performance events, for such study

would make little difference to interpretation. The written text was what mattered.

The scholarship done in the last centuries using the assumptions of print media has given us many insights into the New Testament writings and the early church. Enlightenment scholarship in the historical-critical and narrative modes of analysis has been and continues to be significant and generative. We have no desire to discount earlier scholarship. Nevertheless, because it has treated the text in a medium different from its original medium, it has sometimes manifested limited and distorted perspectives that have entailed misconceptions, misinterpretations, and misappropriations. And it has missed the emotional and corporeal impact of performance. For example, with a print mentality, textual criticism has assumed an original, fixed text from which all subsequent manuscripts contain corruptions by inadvertent changes or by efforts at corrections happening in linear fashion from one manuscript to the next. By contrast, in an oral medium, compositions were made orally and were changed regularly to address different audiences and contexts, resulting in multiple originals. Scribes functioned like performers and, in interaction with oral performances, contributed in positive ways to the fluidity of the manuscript tradition. Source criticism, working on the same mistaken print model, has assumed that we could work back in linear fashion through written and oral traditions to the one original, fixed saying of Jesus, as if Jesus never said the same thing many times and in different ways.

The predominant print paradigm is in need of a serious replacement that embraces the oral nature of the texts and the oral dynamics of early Christianity. It is time to shift our perspective to performance. What follows is a description of orality, memory, writing, and performance as components of the first-century media world, a world that did not know print texts as they exist today. Embracing these factors constitutes a paradigm shift.

*The New Paradigm Assumes the Fundamental Orality of the Text*

The print scenario charted above is not what happened in the oral media cultures of the first centuries. In the print model, composition, text, and reception are three disparate phases separated in time and space. In the oral model of communication, all three occur together in particular performance events. The comparable oral model might look like this:

Oral Composer — Composing Orally from Memory — To a  
Communal Audience

In this model, authors composed orally and may have been the first performers of the Gospel traditions—indeed of entire Gospels. Composing was not done with pen in hand in the act of writing. Rather, speeches and stories were composed in memory by ear for the sound of the composition (much like music) and were performed orally, often without recourse to anything written at all. For the Gospels, the traditions were composed and repeatedly recomposed, developed and refined in the course of many performances. For the letters, the performers would re-perform the letter from memory. It is likely that the early Christian tradition, even with lengthy compositions like Gospels and letters, often went from oral performance to oral performance. Gospels and letters were performed by people who often were not literate, were heard by other nonliterate, and were subsequently performed by them.

The contents of oral compositions (what we would call texts) were not fixed but fluid; each performer (including the composer who performed) would have done at least some recomposing in performance. Thus, each performance would be distinctive and in some sense an original. The composition-as-performance would manifest features typical of ancient oral arts as well as arts of performing. The receptor audience would be communal. The performer would interact with the audience during the performance. The performer would be focused not only on conveying to the audience the content of the composition but even more on persuasion, on arousing the emotional conviction of the audience to take action of some kind. In an oral culture, education, entertainment, and transformation are not separate activities.

Changing the model of communication from print to orality and memory has great significance for the methods we scholars employ to study the writings now in the New Testament and for the interpretations that result. Writing of course existed and will be discussed further below. It is because of writing that we have these texts today. It is hard for us today, however, to imagine how limited in importance writing and manuscripts were to the rise of Christianity in the first century. Our argument is that the recognition of this change of medium is nothing less than a fundamental paradigm shift in the field of biblical studies.

## The New Model of Ancient Media

The new media model that replaces the print model has four interrelated components: oral ethos of communal identity, the predominance of memory, the functions of handwritten scrolls, and performance events. These are

related to each other in diverse ways that need to be sorted out in specific cases. Here is a brief profile of each of these components.

### *The Oral Ethos of Early Christianity*

The fundamental change in perspective from print to the first-century media world will embrace the predominantly oral nature of the first-century cultures and early Christianity. More than 95 percent of the population was nonliterate (or should we say *oralate* as distinct from *literate*). Literacy rates were higher (or less abysmal) among men than women, and in urban rather than rural settings, so perhaps a maximum of 15 percent of urban males were to some degree literate, mainly because of the high presence of elites there and those working for them.<sup>19</sup> Among the 2 percent of the population who were elites, literacy was common among the males, and frequent among women, but even here, reading and writing were considered labor and often handled by slaves who would read aloud or take down dictation. All, including literate elites, were steeped in oral culture.

Oral cultures were marked primarily by social interactions, with little individualism as we know it, and with limited privacy. Because virtually all communication was face-to-face in personal and communal interactions, the oral sharing of traditions—whether through informal conversation or by means of formal performances—was the primary means that formed a collective memory and shaped social identity.

In these predominantly oral cultures, manuscripts, including copies of Hebrew Scriptures, were expensive and few. For the most part, people learned about the Hebrew Scriptures, which were held in sacred esteem, as oral traditioning by storytellers and rabbis. Throughout the first century, most early Christian communities had no or few manuscripts, each of which might contain only a single writing.

Overwhelmingly, those in the first century who experienced the contents of the writings that came to be included centuries later in the New Testament experienced them as oral performances to gathered audiences. The direct experience of written scrolls was not unimportant, but it was limited and peripheral, especially in the first century. Storytelling of the Gospels would have been shared from memory or in lively public readings, most likely in their entirety at one time. The letters were also read aloud in a performative manner or performed orally from memory by the letter carrier and later performers. Here, what was important was not that Paul

19. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 267.

wrote a letter but that the performer of the letter conveyed what Paul was *saying* in his letter.

In such cultures, an oral/aural medium predominated. As Christianity developed in the late second and third centuries, scrolls and codices became increasingly important, at least among the literate few, and the manuscripts eventually began to show marks for dividing the texts for selective readings in worship. Nevertheless, the percentage of those who were not able to read remained substantially unchanged, even up to the time of the printing press.

### *Memory in Predominantly Oral Cultures*

It is the role of memory in antiquity that makes possible an independence from writing. Among both literates and nonliterates alike, memory was more central than writing. Thus, the paradigm shift to performance is not only a shift in our perception from writing to speech but also a shift in perspective from written texts to memory as the dominant mode of creating and transmitting traditions. Therefore, it is not enough to speak of a shift from literacy to orality. Ancient Mediterranean cultures were memorial cultures, in which memory was more important than manuscripts as the repository of tradition; and writing—when present—served performance. Writing did not replace memory; it facilitated it. Speech and memory went together, and both could be served by writing.

In predominantly oral cultures, memory was highly valued. It was common in villages and communities for those with memorial gifts to stand out as storytellers and tradition bearers. People with gifts of memory and speech might regale communities for hours with stories and wisdom. Women and men alike engaged in performing traditions. Performances of the epics of Homer from memory were part of the Olympic Games. Lengthy stories spoken or sung were common at symposia meals. For the elites, memory was central to their education for public life. Memory as preparation for the delivery of an oration was one of the five key elements of the *syllabus* of rhetoric. Handbooks of rhetoric discussed techniques of memory. Ancients cultivated the natural memory and developed technologies of memory that enabled performers to recall lengthy stories and orations by associating portions of a story with the rooms of a house or images of animals or the backdrop of a stage. Stories about prodigious feats of memory by literates and nonliterates were common in antiquity.

Memory was the primary means by which a predominantly oral culture taught, reinforced, and retained its customs, values, history, and beliefs. This was the collective or social memory held in common by the people of a

village, community, society, or by subgroups such as early Christian groups. Within the subgroup, memory was held in common because traditions were experienced together communally. The common memory about the past gave identity to the community or subgroup in the present. Traditions were formulated so as to make them memorable for both performers and audiences—through dramatic action and emotional appeal, with sayings, parables, wisdom pieces, stories, and orations, all of which made use of alliteration, assonance, parallelism, chiasmic ordering, sound patterns, and many more oral arts. Memory was the lifeblood of oral/aural cultures.

Memory was closely tied to performance. Memory was integral to the art of composing. Composers, familiar with the traditions, would compose in performance from memory. Performers of all kinds—storytellers, orators, rhetors, teachers, letter bearers, priests, and others—would use memory to hear and retain and re-perform. Compositions were structured and styled to facilitate the memory of the performer and the audience. There is some very limited evidence of verbatim memorization in antiquity, especially in relation to short poems, the epics of Homer, and some rabbinic traditions. However, for the most part, the memory was fluid, because performers would shape and recompose for particular audiences and would adapt traditions to new situations.

In this kind of culture, memory provides a lens for the shift of paradigm. A traditional biblical critic looks at a text and sees a repository of tradition in print. By contrast, from a memorial perspective, the performance critic relates to a text more as a musical score, using all the memory arts in the composition to get the melody in the head and on the heart so that it can be heard as a performance. What are the rhythms and patterns? What does it sound like? What needs to be repeated in a variety of ways so that it does not get lost? Is it memorable for an audience? How do the patterns of structure and sound enable the performer to recall? How can the performer get the story into his or her body—through gestures, posture, movement, facial expressions—so as to make the story memorable? What emotions does the performer want to arouse in the audience so that they do not forget their experience? How does all of this come together to lead the community to change and act in certain ways? Hence, memory is a significant part of the paradigm shift.

### *Writing in Early Christianity*

It is crucial but not enough simply to recognize the comparatively limited role of writing; we must also rethink the nature of writing. We need,

therefore, to reorient our perception of the function of scrolls in predominantly oral/memorial cultures so that we look at writing through the lenses of speech and memory.

As we noted earlier, only a very small minority could read or write, so it was not considered normative to be able to read and write. Reading and writing were thought of as crafts or trades that carried little status. Even among the few elites where literacy was common, it was often slaves who did the reading aloud or writing for them. Hence, within the populace, literacy was not a standard or common expectation from which nonliterate deviated.

Furthermore, scrolls were nothing like our modern printed books. The scrolls themselves were expensive and difficult to handle; frequent unrolling would wear away words. The function of the scrolls was to provide a record of sounds by means of lettering so that they could be recycled back into sound, similar to musical scores. Just as we hum the notes when we read music, so readers read aloud to make clear what sounds the scroll was triggering. The sounds were what mattered.

The writing on scrolls was not designed to facilitate public reading. The writing was made up of a continuous sequence of one uppercase letter after another without a break. The handwritten scrolls had no punctuation, no lowercase letters, no spaces between words, sentences, or paragraphs, and no chapter and verse designations. The primary unit was not the letter or the word; rather, the syllable was the primary unit of speech, combinations of which formed the words spoken for understanding. Given the lack of spaces between words and no punctuation to indicate the end of a clause or sentence, one had to sound out the syllables in order even to know what was to be said. For all intent and purpose, one needed to have studied the content and known it virtually by memory in order to enact a public reading with facility and in such a way as to make the content lively and meaningful. Sometimes a closed scroll may have been held in the left hand as a symbol of authenticity and authority, while the right hand was free for gestures. It is likely that the Gospels and letters were often performed without the presence of a scroll.

Thus, the markings on the scrolls were basically signs that recorded sounds to be retrieved as aids for those who needed to know the sounds for reading aloud or to remember them for performing. Oral dictation was the primary means to get something transcribed into writing; and virtually all reading was done aloud, as means to re-create the sounds. Hence, when writing occurred, it mostly served the needs of performance of prepared readings or oral performances from memory.

Therefore, the experience of the early church, even in relation to written scrolls, was overwhelmingly oral and memorial both for performers and

for audiences. Biblical scholars have long acknowledged that short traditions such as parables and sayings and stories about Jesus circulated orally, but we have not acknowledged the fundamentally oral orientation of entire Gospels and letters as well. As transcriptions of performances or the result of dictations for performances, the scrolls are trace records of these performances. As we have said, they are examples of performance literature, similar to scores that denote musical sounds or to scripts to be enacted as drama. We need to redirect our focus onto the orality and memory of the early churches and to interpret the New Testament scrolls in terms of their relationship to orality and memory in performance.

### *Performances in Early Christianity*

Performance criticism brings together the three foci of the ancient media complex in the study of performance—orality, memory, and (sometimes) writing. Performance was the main means in ancient society and early Christianity to carry traditions, establish and reinforce social memory, and secure communal identity. Performance criticism analyzes the traces of orality in the writings, seeks to imagine the dynamics of performances, and reconstructs possible performance events.

Performance criticism seeks to construct possible performance scenarios as a basis for understanding the nature of performances and their potential impact on specific communities. Elements of performance events include the social location and role of a performer, the composition being performed, the dynamics of its performance, the makeup of the audience and their participation in the performance event, the potential responses of the audience after the performance, the physical location of the performance, the cultural ethos and resonances of their traditions, the issues faced by the community, and the historical context.

The performer brings a story world to life and seeks to draw the communal audience into that world as a way of having a particular impact on them. It is critical to note that the composition not only depicts happenings in the story world but also at the same time gives what we might call cues and stage directions for performers. When a demon screams, or when Jesus lays hands on someone, or when Jesus begins a journey to Jerusalem or when Paul depicts receiving the right hand of fellowship from the pillars in Jerusalem, or when Paul graphically depicts the death of Jesus, these are triggers for the inflection or volume of the voice and for gestures and facial expressions by the performer who is portraying the characters and illustrating the actions. These represent the performance arts for the voice



(inflection, volume, pace, voice characterizations), body language (gestures, movement, posture, location), facial expressions (scowl, winks, puzzlement, eye messages), and movement (re-creating in the performance space the changes of venue in the story world). Many other subtle things are designed to convey a message by the way a line is delivered, to indicate irony or suspense, to express and evoke emotion, to provoke laughter, to emphasize a point, and so on. These performance arts are critical for us to appreciate as we imagine the variety of ways a composition may have been performed, its diversity of meanings, and the potential impacts it may have had upon a community.

Performance may have differed in style depending on the size of the audience and the location of the performance. If done in a public square or marketplace, the performance may have needed to be loud and physically dramatic, even bombastic, at least by our standards. If done for a small group in a house church, the performance would have been more subdued. In either case, from what we know of descriptions in rhetorical handbooks, the performances were animated and emotional. And we know that audiences participated actively in the performance event. The composition itself suggests the identification of lines and phrases where audience responses were expected. The audience participated with intrusive comments, gestures of approval such as foot stomping or hand clapping, and emotional responses such as weeping and laughing. Of course, there may have been the equivalent of booing and walking out when there was resistance to a performance.

Furthermore, if the composition of a Gospel or letter admonishes a group or urges a community to persevere or to take certain actions, we may imagine how that played out in the communal audience after the performance, including conversation with the performer. How might the audience have dealt with the performance in relation to conflicts within the community or to echoes of events in their traditions or to stresses and persecutions from outside the community?

In addition to identifying the role that oral arts and memory arts played in any given performance, we also need to discern the ways in which resonances of common community traditions echoed in the performance. All these and more are relevant to our efforts to employ ancient media as means to understand the potential meanings and possible impacts of the writings in the New Testament that were once performed before early Christian communities.

## Reorienting and Changing Our Methods

In light of the paradigm shift to performance, we need to put the spotlight on the methods we use to study the New Testament and to construct images of early Christianity in order to see in what ways our methodologies need to be revised, reoriented, replaced, or expanded so as to account for the oral and memorial nature of early Christianity in performance. Performance criticism has come to serve as an eclectic approach that seeks to bring together many perspectives and methods relevant to the paradigm shift. This is the case, both because so many disciplines are affected by the paradigm shift, and because the contributions of so many different disciplines are needed to understand and construct performance scenarios.

Some scholarly methods by which we study the New Testament may not be so much affected by performance criticism. For example, historical studies, archaeology, and cultural anthropology might not be much changed except to reframe their work in the context of a predominantly oral culture. Other areas of New Testament study, however, such as the synoptic problem, source criticism, and historical Jesus studies, may look quite different when approached with an oral paradigm that imagines multiple originals rather than with a print paradigm that assumes a single original. Textual criticism will need to change as we see the manuscript tradition not as a closed system of written documents but in interaction with an oral tradition that was fluid and creative. Form criticism and genre criticism may be changed significantly by considering how these texts worked as oral compositions performed from memory to ancient communal audiences. Likewise, narrative criticism and reader-response criticism would be reoriented to treat the Gospels as oral events by a performer to an early Christian community. Rhetorical criticism would be reconfigured to account for the emotional impact generated by performance. Discourse analysis would take the dynamics of sound into account. Ideological criticism might be reoriented to focus on the power dynamics involved in the face-to-face interactions during ancient performance events. The art of translation would be deeply affected as practitioners seek to go from the orality of the biblical texts to contemporary oral performances. Already substantive probes are being made to transform these disciplines for study of a predominantly oral world.

In addition, in order to develop the new paradigm fully, more recent methodologies might become central—methodologies such as cultural analysis of contemporary oral cultures, social-memory theory, performance studies in oral interpretation, theater studies, sound mapping, and speech-act theory. Already, some significant scholarly contributions have been

made. And contemporary performances are being offered that reflect the revolutionary paradigm shift in the communication media of our studies.

The essays in this volume exemplify the kind of work that is being done to implement these changes: topics include the layers of oral tradition that resonate in an oral performance (Maxwell), the way narrative criticism needs to be transformed into a study of story in performance (Ruge-Jones, Hearon), the impact of a performance on communal audiences (Boomer-shine, Iverson), the careful analysis of oral and memorial arts in a composition (Lee), and the complexity involved in preparing a modern multimedia translation to convey an experience similar to that undergone by an ancient audience (Swanson).

### *Embracing the Paradigm Shift*

Becoming performance critics requires major shifts in our ways of thinking. We need to move from a literary ethos to an oral one; from silence to sound; from writing to speech; from manuscript to memory; from one fixed, original text to multiple and fluid oral renditions; from individual reading to embodied performance. Performance is what brings this all together—sight, sounds, speech, memory, and emotion. Performance is embodied, public, and communal. Performance is an event with a performer, an audience, a setting, an ethos, and historical circumstances. The performance event places speech, memory and (sometimes) writing into a complex nexus of interrelationships.

Based on Thomas Kuhn's analysis of paradigm shifts in science, we can imagine several rather expected responses. A common response to this paradigm shift is to acknowledge it but not know what to do with it. It is difficult to see new possibilities clearly because our accustomed academic paradigms tend to predetermine what we see. Another reaction may be to think that we can just tack this method on as an added building block to be investigated but not as one that will challenge any of our time-honored methods or conclusions. However, it will not be adequate to keep everything the same and just assimilate the oral and memorial dimensions into existing paradigms. And even if we recognize the significance of the new paradigm, we may not be able easily to let go of methods in which we were trained and that we know so well. For those of us trained so exclusively in the analysis of texts, it may be difficult to let go of the idea of a fixed text we can work with. At the same time, young scholars are emerging who are being trained in the new disciplines. Gradually, however, new and more cogent methods will be developed. And, of course, there will be debates about the significance

and extent of the shift. Nevertheless, gradually, many will come to see orality, memory, and performance as central dimensions in our field that will require significant revisions to traditional methods, thorough replacement for others, and the need for added tools of the trade. We are confident that the paradigm shift will eventually take place.

One significant resistance we scholars have to face is that most of us were trained in print analysis. We know how to analyze written texts. How do we shift to an analysis of performance and sound? Furthermore, what about our data? We do have the texts of the New Testament, but we do not have speech; nor, of course, do we have access to ancient performances. Speech is ephemeral and elusive. How could we know what an ancient performance of a letter was like? How could we imagine an ancient performance of a Gospel? There are so many unknowns and variables. Speech involves many cultural dynamics that we may have little way of knowing. How can we operate in the dark? Given all the uncertainties, will this endeavor help us to understand early Christianity and the New Testament texts any better than we do now?

Maybe all these questions are right on target; they certainly represent difficulties to be addressed. However, similar reservations have not stopped us in the past. There seems to be nothing as elusive as the historical Jesus; yet we continue to pursue one portrayal after another. And it is clear that the quest for Jesus has been worthwhile as each new study makes fresh contributions and raises new questions. At a minimum, can we not hope and expect that the same will be true here in this pursuit? We have long stressed the importance of historical context. Communication media are an essential part of that context. We cannot continue to ignore them.

### *Prospectus for Performance Criticism*

While substantial beginnings have been made, the full implications of the paradigm shift continue to unfold. Much work has already been done; much more work is needed. Here we outline a prospectus: a list of areas for continuing study, research, and experimentation to move the process forward. The effort to be comprehensive results in overlap between areas.

1. Learning everything we can about the dynamics and ethos of the oral/aural cultures of the first century; making use of literature, rhetorical handbooks, ancient drama, archaeology, paintings, sculptures, manuscripts, papyri, and other artifacts. This effort includes information about proclaimers of all kinds, formal and informal storytelling and tradition sharing, venues, literacy rates, the nature and status of

manuscripts, how scribes and dictation functioned, what reading was, how performances took place, what audience responses could be, and the impact of performances on audiences.

2. Studying other predominantly oral societies. Oral cultures are collectivist societies in which social identity is shaped by the daily interpersonal relationships that take place among people. There is no individualism as we know in modernity and there is often little privacy or encouragement for introspection. In such a society, how does conversation and performance reflect, reinforce, shape, and change the collective memory and the social identity? Here analogies from studies of contemporary oral/aural cultures will be useful. How different are various oral societies from one another?
3. Attending to the differences between the elite culture and the popular cultures of the first century. This involves the roles that writing played in the power dynamics between the elites who used writing to dominate the populace, who in turn could use oral speech (and sometimes writing) to resist. And it involves understanding the evolution of ancient media taking place in the second century and later as the predominantly oral and memorial cultures of early Christianity became more and more influenced by—or controlled by—the presence of written manuscripts and literate institutional leaders.
4. Attending to differences between men's and women's oral cultures and what happens to women's traditions in the second century and following centuries as Christianity became more controlled by written texts and literate (generally male) leaders.
5. Giving attention to how traditions are passed on in predominantly oral cultures. What are the possible interrelationships between written traditions and oral tellings? How do traditions in oral media resonate with past associations and build new accretions? How do innovations take place? How are oral allusions different from intertextuality, and how do they convey layers of associations?
6. Focusing on the dynamics of memory in the predominantly oral cultures of the first centuries, on the different roles memory played in Greek and Hebrew cultures, on the common capacity to know traditions by heart, on the role of memory in storytelling and reading, and on its place in the rhetorical education among elites. Especially exploring the collective memory of an oral culture, how it shapes social identity, how it develops and changes, and the ways it interacts with manuscripts.

7. Reconsidering scribes and manuscripts, the practices of scribes, their role as shapers of the tradition, and the various uses of handwritten scrolls. How did the continuous script function? And how were the writing and the scrolls managed by various performers who worked from memory or who did a public reading? To what extent did scribes function as performers in contributing creatively to developing traditions?
8. Establishing criteria and developing methods for garnering the traces of orality from the extant writings we have in the New Testament and related literature—traces including *oral arts* of speech, *memory arts* designed to assist both performers and audiences, and *performance arts* evident in cues for the performer. This will include mapping the patterns of sound that give order and organization to a composition. These endeavors will require a new generation of scholars to be trained not only in reading ancient Greek but also in listening and speaking.
9. Experimenting with performances (in Greek and in translation) as a means to get in touch with the dynamics of performance: intonation, gesture, facial expressions, movement, subtext, emotions, humor, and interaction with audiences. In this way, we can imagine the possibilities of ancient performance better and even experience the dynamics of oral expression—as performer and as audience. Most of all, performing places us in the rhetorical position of seeking to have an impact upon an audience, thereby shifting the center of gravity in interpretation from a focus on semantic meaning to a focus on rhetorical force. This step may lead some New Testament interpreters to be trained as oral interpreters of literature.
10. Constructing possible performance scenarios that give us concrete imaginative contexts for performances of the documents we now have: the nature of performance, the social location and role of the performer, the audience, the venue, the life world or cultural context, the socio-historical circumstances, the implied aural impact on the audience, and other factors. For example, we can imagine a messenger of Paul who has brought the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon performing the letter to Philemon in front of the community that gathers in his house. Or we can imagine Mark being performed in its entirety in the marketplace of a northern Palestinian village with a mixed audience of Judeans and Gentiles, taking place shortly after the Roman Judean War of 66 to 70 CE. Such scenarios provide concrete contexts for us to imagine the performances of various New Testament writings as a basis for our reinterpretation of them.

11. Rethinking current New Testament methodologies in light of this paradigm shift. In so far as these disciplines employ or mimic the mentality of our modern print culture, we need to reorient and reframe them for study of the New Testament in a predominantly oral world. In addition, scholars are exploring secular disciplines new to New Testament studies that are relevant to this paradigm shift, such as theater studies, oral interpretation of literature, performance studies in general, social-memory theory, and speech-act analysis. All these are helpful for understanding the dynamics of performance events.
12. Translating the New Testament texts for performance as a means to enable us to discern in the Greek oral features such as word order, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, and so on, and challenging us to find ways to replicate these in modern languages. In turn, the experience of performing leads the performer to discern possibilities for translation that might not otherwise come to mind. The interaction of translating and performing are critical methods for interpretation.
13. Providing fresh interpretations of the New Testament writings as performance literature in the context of an oral/aural culture.
14. Grappling with theories of media studies. They help us understand the different communications media in history and the way the various media have shaped worldviews. We can be aware of changes that the electronic (digital) culture is making to the print culture in which many of us were raised. As scholars, we can become aware of the anachronistic print-culture mentality that has shaped and informed our methods and interpretations; we can recognize the flaws and limitations resulting from our print mentality; and we can become trained in the use of disciplines that engage the ancient media involving a combination of orality, memory, scribality, and performance.

## Conclusion

Performance criticism is a new challenge and an exciting adventure in the field of biblical studies. It is important that we recognize it as a paradigm shift so that we embrace its revolutionary nature and grasp the transformations it requires of us. Everything looks somewhat different. Therefore it calls forth from us fresh methods, new information, and a great stretch of the imagination.

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