

## Article

# Biblical Performance Criticism: Survey and Prospects

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**Abstract:** Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) analyzes communication events of biblical traditions for audiences. Every communication event of a tradition has four aspects: a communicator, traditions re-expressed, an audience, and a social situation. This essay surveys the history of BPC and its current prospects and points to the future work of developing a fine-grained theoretical foundation for its work. In the analytical mode, a scholar gathers and examines data from a past performance event to describe it, and its effects, in detail. In the heuristic mode, a performer presents a tradition to an audience in order to better understand its dynamics. In the practical mode, a person reflects on the performance of biblical traditions in daily life. In these ways, BPC reunites biblical scholarship fragmented by critical reduction, and bridges the academic and popular use of biblical traditions.

**Keywords:** performance criticism; biblical interpretation; oral tradition; communication; relevance theory; memory; translation; rhetoric

## 1. Introduction

Biblical traditions have been presented and re-presented in various ways throughout history.<sup>1</sup> The Bible itself indicates ways that its early audiences may have experienced it. Moses is portrayed in Deuteronomy as retelling the story of the exodus from Egypt while the Israelites stand on the bank of the Jordan River ready to enter Canaan (Deut 9:1). The book of Proverbs imagines parents repeating its wisdom to their children (e.g., 1:8). Singers and musicians practice psalms to sing in the courts of the Jerusalem Temple (1 Chr 25). Ezra the scribe reads the scroll of the Law of Moses to the people gathered in the restored walls of Jerusalem, and Levites help further teach and explain it to the audience (Neh 8). Luke depicts Jesus standing to read from an Isaiah scroll before sitting to teach (Luke 4). Matthew and Luke describe Jesus teaching similar words in two locations, a Sermon on the Mount and a Sermon on the Plain (Matt 5–7; Luke 6: 17–49). Acts portrays Paul and other apostles summarizing the history of Israel, climaxing with Jesus, to people gathered in synagogues (e.g., Acts 13:16–41). Paul asks that his letters be read to all believers in Thessalonika (1 Thess 5:27). John expects the book of Revelation to be read aloud, likely to many audiences (Rev 1:3). These examples suggest the ways in which almost all the biblical material functioned in communication events.

Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) is both a way to understand communication events of biblical traditions and a method for exploring meaning-making in those events.<sup>2</sup> By “performance,” we mean a communication event re-expressing traditions for an audience (Perry 2016, p. 28; see Schechner 2013, p. 29). In every biblical communication event there is a performer, a tradition called “biblical,” an audience, and a situation. Meaning-making is not restricted to any one of these four elements but occurs in the ephemeral communication event and its processing by participants during and after the event. As both epistemology and method, BPC is used analytically, heuristically, or practically.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org/> for more resources and bibliography.

## 2. A Brief History of BPC

Biblical Performance Criticism incorporates the insights of many disciplines and reframes those disciplines to analyze communication events rather than simply texts and contexts. Beginning with form criticism, many modern critical disciplines read biblical texts in terms of the interaction of: (1) someone speaking; (2) someone hearing; (3) a tradition; and (4) a social situation.

BPC emerges from, and depends on, the insights from many critical disciplines. As the early 20th century began, form critics (e.g., Gunkel, Noth, von Rad, Dibelius, and Bultmann) analyzed biblical traditions as anonymous oral traditions that circulated as genre fragments, applied in various social situations and eventually collected and written. In the 1930s, oral-tradition scholars Milman Parry and Lord (1960) discovered that Bosnian storytellers used repeated type scenes and formulas in a way that helped to understand Homer's Greek epics. These insights were further refined by Ong (1998), Havelock (1982), Finnegan (1988), and Foley (1988), and first applied to New Testament traditions by Kelber (1983) and to the Hebrew Bible by Niditch (1996). Rhetorical criticism, as developed by Kennedy (1984) and Betz (1989), analyzed the way biblical authors tried to persuade audiences with reasoning, emotion, and their character. Narrative critics helped biblical scholars analyze texts as stories with characters, setting, time, plot, and point of view (Rhoads et al. 2012). Memory studies examined how memory is socially constructed, i.e. by a group of people who tell and retell memories that organize relationships, space, and time for that group (Kirk and Thatcher 2005). Media studies analyzed and compared the way the medium (e.g., face-to-face, written, live radio, recorded video) affects communication (Boomershine 1987; Rodríguez 2014). Text critics such as Parker (1997) demonstrated that some variations between manuscripts may be the result of different performances and memories of the material. Performance criticism, emerging out of cultural anthropology and theater studies (Bauman 1977, Carlson 2004, Schnechener 2013, Conquergood 2002), further illuminated embodied actions that are rehearsed and performed (Doan and Giles 2005; Mathews 2012). Each of these scholar's work and methods elucidate some aspect of communication events between someone who speaks or writes, an audience, a biblical tradition, and a social situation.

### 2.1. Biblical Performance Criticism 1.0

Scholars influenced by each of these disciplines came together in what I am calling BPC 1.0. This version of BPC was characterized by three movements: distinguishing oral from written communication, elucidating the ancient world as a primarily oral culture, and performing memorized biblical texts face-to-face for audiences. By drawing a sharp contrast between oral and written cultures, these modern scholars and performers created a theoretical space for reconceiving how biblical texts were composed, used, and received.

Inspired by oral tradition studies outside the guild of biblical scholarship (Milman and Parry, Ong, Finnegan), Kelber, Niditch, J. Dewey and others identified textual characteristics, formulas, patterns, rhythms, and lexemes as residue of their oral composition and performance. Ong compared oral and written communication in binary oppositions: i.e., communication in primarily oral cultures was additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant rather than economical, conservative rather than innovative, concrete rather than abstract, agonistic rather than neutral, participatory rather than objective, and so on (Ong 1998, pp. 36–57). Within these binary constructions, Dewey (1995), Wire (2011), and others, re-evaluated texts contemporary with the Bible for evidence of oral communication. Shiner (2003), Dewey (2009), Botha (2012), and others analyzed rhetorical figures such as parataxis, prosopopoeia, ring composition, and hyperbaton as signs that a text was composed for oral performance and aural reception. For example, Mark's gospel has an abundance of *kai* parataxis, which in synoptic passages Matthew and Luke seem to have removed. This suggested that Mark was composed in oral performance rather than the more written "sounding" compositions by Matthew and Luke (Wire 2011, pp. 80–84). This "morphological" approach to oral traditions (so named by Rodríguez) searches for the textual residue of oral composition and performance (Rodríguez 2014, p. 56; cf. Lord 1995; Vatri 2017 calls this a philological approach).

The second movement of BPC 1.0 elucidated the dynamics of ancient oral culture. Distinct from any morphological or philological evidence discovered in ancient texts, these scholars described media cultures, that is, the way a group's behavior, attitudes, and values were shaped around particular communication media. Evidence of oral communication is abundant, for example, Apuleius' *Golden Ass* is evidence for informal storytellers; Dio Chrysostom describes walking through a horse track in Asia Minor and seeing someone "reading a poem aloud, another singing, and another telling some story or myth" (Or. 20.10 LCL; see [Hearon 2009](#)). Mark's gospel contains an aside, "let the [public] reader understand" (13:14); Paul and John expect their letters to be read aloud (1 Thess 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev 1:3). Scholars such as [Kelber \(1995\)](#), [Horsley and Draper \(1999\)](#), [Loubser \(2013\)](#), and [Rhoads \(2009\)](#) distinguished between cultures that communicate orally and print cultures inaugurated by the printing press and modern mass production of texts. They point out that even Matthew, Luke and John, who use less *kai* parataxis than Mark, wrote and were received in a culture where few (estimated by [Harris 1989](#), and [Herzer 2001](#), to be between 3% and 10% of the population) could pick up a scroll and fluently verbalize the text for an audience. If only a few could read aloud fluently, then the primary way people experienced these texts was through the performance of a lector, someone who studied the text ahead of time to speak aloud for a group. In 1983, Boomershine founded the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) section "the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media" (BAMM) to develop a methodology for interpreting the Bible in both media cultures. [Boomershine \(1995\)](#), [Ward \(1995\)](#), [Shiner \(2003\)](#), [Shiell \(2004\)](#), and others mined ancient texts to describe how they may have been used in oral performance. They argued text itself was subordinate to the face-to-face performance of the text. Works were composed with attention to sound, including pacing, tone, and volume. Memory played an essential role for both performer and audience. Performer and audience interacted, and audience members interacted with each other in ways that influenced meaning. Emotions were considered in composition, performance, and reception. The bodies of performer and audience were integral to the event: standing, sitting, gesturing, moving, facial expressions, eye contact, applause or foot stomping could influence how a tradition was received ([Shiner 2003](#)). The performance space affected how the event was experienced. [Person \(2010\)](#) and [Rodríguez \(2014\)](#) extended the work of Foley to describe the simultaneous variability and stability of oral traditions. Rodríguez calls this a "contextual" approach to oral traditions because it describes a group's values, attitudes, and behaviors that constitute a media culture ([Lord 1995](#) "philosophical"; [Vatri 2017](#)).

In the third movement of BPC 1.0, scholars performed texts. Rhoads, Shiner, [Boomershine \(1988, 2015\)](#), and Ruge-Jones memorized biblical texts (including whole books such as Mark and Galatians) to perform from memory with dramatic gestures and use of voice. In a two-part article that announced BPC as "an emerging criticism," Rhoads argued that the written text was like a musical score or a play by Shakespeare ([Rhoads 2006a, 2006b](#)). No one would argue that you could understand Mozart by simply looking at the notes on a page, or the *Merchant of Venice* by simply reading it silently. Biblical texts were intended to be vocalized and embodied. [Boomershine \(1988\)](#), [Swanson \(2004\)](#), and [Ward and Trobisch \(2013\)](#) developed techniques and advice for modern readers to perform biblical traditions for modern audiences. [Maxey \(2009\)](#) incorporated face-to-face performances of texts into translation theory and practice. These performers discovered new insights through their performances, and their audiences were moved in ways they had not experienced through silent readings or monotone presentations.

Many contributions were made by scholars of this first stage of BPC, more than can be listed here. In general, we can summarize these as follows: (1) they exposed how the Bible was misunderstood if it was reduced down to one element (the written text) rather than the interaction of all four elements (performer, audience, tradition, and situation); (2) as a result, they opened up a new space in scholarship for re-conceiving the composition, performance, and reception of biblical traditions; (3) they restored the embodiment of these traditions as an analytical category; (4) they highlighted overlooked or minimized evidence for the role of memory, delivery, emotion, sound, physical space, and audience

interaction; and (5), they proved the value of modern face-to-face performances of texts for both performers and audiences to better understand their dynamics and impact.

Early criticism came from within the circle of those working in disciplines related to BPC. For example, Kelber's ground breaking *The Oral and Written Gospel* (1983) was criticized for promoting a false "Great Divide" that bifurcated orality from literacy. Kelber recalibrated his position to emphasize that the two media are interconnected and interdependent (Kelber 2013, pp. 174–86). Wendland criticized the lack of theoretical foundations (Wendland 2008). Spencer Miller (2013) and Esala (2015) exposed the western cultural assumptions that lurk behind BPC. Rodríguez problematized the category of "orality studies" as aspirational when referring to the first century since the evidence is primarily textual (2014). Parataxis, prosopopoeia, ring composition, and other rhetorical figures cannot be considered marks of solely oral composition since they are also used in written compositions. He advocated "media criticism" as the preferred name for this discipline rather than the ambiguous and often misunderstood "performance criticism."

Looking back, we can see that much of BPC 1.0 was necessarily radical in its rhetoric. Strong and clear distinctions were needed to break through the unstated communication assumptions that dominated scholarship. Exaggerated binaries allowed performance realities to be heard over the standard set of analytical categories. Although these "divides" proved persuasive to some, they failed when subjected to close scrutiny. Echoing Foley, if BPC 1.0 was "in retrospect too coarse-grained, we should remember that it was their initial approximations that created a new field of inquiry and made later, more fine-grained investigations possible" (Foley 2015, p. 106).

Broader criticism of BPC and its subsequent refinement has launched what I am calling BPC 2.0. Hurtado (2014) brought public criticism from outside the circles of BPC scholars. He questioned the default assumption held by some that texts were memorized by early Christians word-for-word and performed with little or no reference to a physical text. He challenged the premise that silent reading of texts was rare in the first century CE. He criticized the word "performance" as either so broad as to refer to everything as performance, or so narrow as to refer to what actors do in a theater. He implied that a modern performance (i.e., memorizing and performing aloud with gestures and movement) could not shed any light on an ancient performance. The best we can do, Hurtado suggests, is carefully study the manuscript evidence.

Hurtado's critiques do not apply to many BPC scholars today (Iverson 2016). As noted, BPC had already been changing as a result of internal critiques. The rhetorical value of "great divides"—speech vs. writing, oral vs. print cultures, memory vs. text, public vs. individual reading, aloud vs. silent—had exhausted its usefulness.

## 2.2. Biblical Performance Criticism 2.0

Biblical Performance Criticism is now many groups and movements, each with their own focus and interests. Analysis of texts as evidence of performances has spread far beyond "the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media" and "Performance Criticism of the Bible and other Ancient Texts" (begun in 2007). For example, the Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts (SCRIPT) was founded in 2010.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, forty-seven sections of the annual SBL meeting included papers addressing some aspect of performance, including: a paper on ritual texts and ritual performances in a section on papyrology; another on women's roles in Roman funerals in a section on Greco-Roman religions; and another on embodiment and emotion in the Lukan infancy narrative.

In general, we can summarize that BPC 2.0 is moving in at least six directions yielding finer-grained analysis of communication of biblical traditions. These directions include:

1. Describing ancient communication events in as much detail as possible based on the evidence, with attention to all four aspects of a performance Johnson (2017), Oestreich (2016), and others

<sup>3</sup> <http://script-site.net/index.html>.

have written careful historical reconstructions of ancient performance scenarios. Wright (2017) has exposed a wealth of data about ancient communal reading events.

2. Clarifying ancient media cultures. Person (2010, 2011), Rodríguez (2014), Keith (2014), and others describe the interaction of spoken and written traditions within specific media cultures indicated by evidence in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.
3. Exploring the dynamics of social memory. Kirk (2018), Thatcher, and Rodríguez have applied models of social memory to New Testament traditions.
4. Analyzing the sound of ancient texts and their probable impact on audiences. Based on detailed discourse analysis and study of ancient pronunciation, Lee and Scott (2009), Brickle (2012, 2018), Nässelqvist (2015, 2018) and others have developed and are refining methods for mapping the sounds of Greek New Testament texts, the ways sound delimit passages and indicate aural intensity, intonation/pitch, volume, speed, and voice quality (Lee 2018). Vatri's application of cognitive linguistics to processing of classical Attic prose offers a promising avenue for biblical scholars (2017).
5. Applying the insights of BPC to translation theory. Maxey (2009, 2016), Esala (2015), Wendland (2012) and others are using performance to translate biblical traditions more effectively.
6. Using performance to teach biblical languages and biblical studies. Buth,<sup>4</sup> West (2016), and Halcomb (2014) are examples of teachers using performance to teach Greek and Hebrew. Because performance is fully embodied, learning is visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

Further work needs to be done, especially in three areas:

1. Re-engaging rhetorical criticism, especially in terms of memory and delivery, two of the five tasks of the orator described by ancient theorists. The works of Shiner (2003) and Shiell (2004) are the last major works in this area, and the deposit of biographies, speeches, and letters remains to be explored for evidence of how memory and delivery influenced their composition, performance, and reception.
2. Incorporating analysis of power relationships in the composition, performance, and reception of traditions (West 2007; Spencer Miller 2015), including those that maintain a binary division between scholars and performers (Conquergood 2002).
3. Developing a robust and fine-grained theoretical foundation for how modern performances may illuminate ancient performances (see an initial proposal below).

As BPC becomes more diverse, it will be important that scholars listen and learn from each other outside their areas of specialization, especially to develop a clear theoretical framework. What follows is an initial movement towards that goal.

### 3. What Is Biblical Performance Criticism?

#### 3.1. Defining "Performance"

We are defining "performance" as a communication event re-expressing traditions before an audience. Performance refers to more than dramatic presentations on a stage; it also refers to lectors reading, choirs singing, teachers teaching, writers writing, and so on—any time a tradition is re-presented. Reading a text aloud is a species of performance. "Performance" is inherently a contested term, which is appropriate because the communication of traditions is usually contested in meaning and significance (Carlson 2004, pp. 4–5; Perry 2016, pp. 27–31). When someone dismisses a communication event as "mere performance," it is an attempt to minimize the effects of that communication. Not all communication events are performances. What makes a communication event

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.biblicallanguagecenter.com/>; See also <https://www.glossahouse.com>



a performance is its re-expression of a tradition, its “not for the first time” quality before an audience (Schechner 2013, p. 29).

As a *communication* event, a performance needs to be understood within a framework of how human beings communicate. Everyone operates with some kind of explicit or implicit model of communication, and every biblical studies discipline is strengthened when grounded theoretically in a robust communication theory (Sheppers 2018, p. 174).

An implicit communication theory for many biblical scholars is the code theory that assumes a speaker or writer encodes an idea into language or signals in some media (speech, writing, audio, video) and the audience decodes the signal into the intended meaning. This assumes that the idea is completely contained in the utterance, that all media are equally encodable, and that encoding/decoding abilities are the only requirements for participants in communication. Much of the language we use about communication of biblical traditions assumes a code model. “Transmission” implies that a text is like a radio signal and all we need is to be tuned to the right station. “Reception” perhaps suggests more participation by an audience, but still suggests a relatively passive role. When scholars imply that a text “means” something without discussion of the social situation or audience, they assume a code model of communication. Diagrams such as the following visualize the code model:

Author → Text → Reader

Speaker → Speech → Hearer

The code model of communication is inadequate. Consider a standard example in linguistic textbooks: a person shouts, “fire.” No other words are used. The meaning of this utterance depends on the situation: a firing squad, a theater, or a job evaluation. The utterance itself is insufficient to determine meaning. The situation, the medium, the relationship of the speaker to audience, the ability for the audience to hear and understand the command—each are essential to communication. Take the medium of a command to a firing squad: the voice is optimized for a large group to simultaneously respond but a written note is not. The captain of a firing squad who passes a note that commands, “fire,” would likely not receive a simultaneous volley. By using one word, a speaker assumes her audience<sup>5</sup> can draw on both perception and memory to quickly understand. Whatever communication theory is used for the analysis of biblical traditions, it should acknowledge that: (1) all utterances are underdetermined, which makes inadequate any analysis of a text independent of author, a particular audience, and their situation; (2) different media offer both resources and restrictions for communication; (3) both speakers/authors and hearers/readers will use perception and memory *in addition* to the utterance to infer meaning; and (4) all communication is in some way embodied.

There are many current models used to describe communication. My preference is Relevance Theory (RT) because it is simple and yet powerful in its explanations of communication dynamics (Sperber and Wilson 1996).<sup>6</sup> RT is based on fieldwork in cognitive linguistics and has proven applicable across cultures. It describes well how metaphor, irony, and humor work. A good introductory article on RT for biblical studies is Pattemore (2011), and for applying RT to written communication, Wilson (2018).

Briefly put, RT asserts that all human beings naturally and unconsciously communicate by maximizing effects with adequate effort. Three ideas are important: effect, processing effort, and context. Language is one kind of signal (e.g., verbal, written, non-verbal) used as evidence by the hearer along with perception, memories, ideas, and opinions to infer meaning. The *inferential* nature of communication overturns simplistic, deterministic models that suggest an utterance will be understood by all audiences in the same way. A speaker is limited by her language, media, preferences and knowledge of the hearers, and chooses signals she believes will produce the desired effects with reasonable effort. Some of these effects will only be implied. In RT, the word “context” is used to

<sup>5</sup> Following Relevance Theory’s traditional usage, I will refer to speakers as female and hearers as male.

<sup>6</sup> Other communication theories offer different resources, e.g., Peircian semiotics; as an introduction, see Hodgson (2007).

describe the perceptions, ideas, thoughts, memories and opinions that can be mentally represented. A speaker who is confident that she shares context with her audience may use minimal signals to imply a great deal of meaning. When Paul asks Philemon to prepare a room for him, he assumes that Philemon understands the details of what that means (Phlm 22). Hearers may draw implications beyond what the speaker implied. For example, Philemon may think he needs to buy more food before Paul comes.

When shared context is not available, the processing effort may be too difficult for an audience. For example, for many modern readers of the Bible, the effect of reading the genealogy of Noah (Gen 5) may not seem worth the effort. In the technical sense, the “relevance” of a communication event refers to the effects experienced by the audience for some processing effort, for example, strengthening or weakening assumptions, emotions, attitudes, beliefs, or actions. Some readers may stop processing before optimal relevance is reached; others may sense that there will be further effects that are worth their time and energy to process (e.g., thought, research, discussion with others.) Others will over-process an utterance and go beyond what is intended.

RT helps to understand media dynamics in communication. If human beings, by virtue of our cognitive makeup, naturally balance effects and efforts (as limited by the speaker’s abilities and preferences), then an author will optimize the communication for the chosen media. Vatri (2017) warns against assuming that optimization for spoken communication precludes written communication. RT predicts that, based on previous memories and experiences with various media, an author will unconsciously and consciously optimize communication for the ways the author imagines the audience will use the media. A letter can be optimized both for silent as well as spoken reading. Face-to-face communication offers the additional signals of facial expressions, intonation, pace and pauses, gestures, and interaction with the audience that are not available in writing. Written texts, on the other hand, offer paratextual evidence (e.g., handwriting style, paper and ink quality and color, marginal marks or comments). Physical texts are available for repeated examination and more processing time, while face-to-face communication is linear and requires more rapid processing.

RT emphasizes the bodily nature of all communication. In face-to-face communication, the entire body is being observed by the audience and consciously or unconsciously used with other signals to draw inferences about the speaker’s meaning. In BPC 2.0, we are moving away from the terms “oral” and “orality.” It is not “oral” communication, as if the voice could be separated from the body (“face-to-face” communication is a preferable term). Writing and reading are also embodied activities. Describing a communication event must involve some kind of description of bodies. Was the writer seated and writing on papyrus on a knee or perched at a keyboard looking at a screen? Both are embodied communication events utilizing different media technologies so that an audience may experience particular effects.

Performance Criticism seeks to describe and analyze communication *events*. The meaning making is not located in one aspect of communication, but the event which brings together the speaker/author, utterance, audience, and situation. This event is, by nature, ephemeral, dynamic, and processed over time. A communication event is never precisely repeatable and so is ephemeral. Even if the same words are spoken by the same person to the same audience, inevitably something has changed in at least one of the people involved and their perception of the situation. As a result, the inferences drawn are different.

As an event, the four aspects are in a dynamic and not a static relationship. The audience may cheer or boo or interrupt a speaker, which in turn may change the words, affect, pace, and so on of the speaker. A reader studying a text may be interrupted by the situation and draw new inferences based on the interruption. A lector reading a text before a congregation may stumble over a word and the congregation misunderstand the idea. The dynamics of each communication event are unique, and any analysis of an event must include as much detail as possible.

Communication events are not necessarily fully processed in that moment. The nature of traditions (discussed below) is that they have been adapted to changes in culture over time and have endured.

Such adaptability and persistence suggest that the inferences drawn from tradition are not exhausted by a single communication event but continue to provide fodder for processing that produces new or richer effects. The Bible represents a collection of traditions that have been presented weekly, even daily, for some audiences. Take, for example, a reading from the Torah in synagogue. A hearer may process it for a moment and draw some conclusions. Then a rabbi stands to speak on the passage. The hearer processes both this new communication event, which involves a second processing of the Torah portion. He may leave the synagogue in conversation with another participant that leads to further effects. Situations may emerge later that day or week that trigger further processing. As we describe communication events, we also must acknowledge that the hearer's processing may continue beyond the time period of the event itself.

### 3.2. Defining "Biblical Performance"

Foley defines tradition as "a dynamic, multivalent body of meaning, ... a living and vital entity with synchronic and diachronic aspects that over time and space will experience (and partially constitute) a unified variety of receptions" (Foley 1995, p. xii). This definition is richer than we can unpack in this essay, but three points suffice. First, "tradition" may include written texts but is always more. A group that uses a text refers to it as a locus of meaning within a network of other memories, values, attitudes, behaviors, and objects—including other texts. Taken out of a network of traditional referents, a text has few communicative effects. In this way, "tradition" constitutes a body of meaning in which groups compose, receive, and perform. Second, tradition is living; something new happens in each performance. Composition within a tradition creates something new even as it relates to the larger body of meaning. While there are a variety of performances and receptions, the variety is not unlimited but bounded by that which allows audiences to perceive and describe it as within a discrete, unified tradition. The third point is a critique: this particular instance of Foley's definition is disembodied, describing tradition as an entity independent of the human bodies that receive, experience, and perform traditions.

Traditions, as dynamic bodies of meaning, are embedded and integral to human cultures. Socially patterned behavior, such as reciting commandments, singing psalms, or reading aloud sacred texts, embody the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of a group. The gestures, intonation, language, and other signals only have meaning within a cultural framework that assigns them value and significance. The performance of traditions takes place within the matrix of power relationships within and outside the group and establishes both individual and group identity (Perry 2016, pp. 29–31).

Oral tradition is embodied, collective memory not comparable to a computer accessing RAM.<sup>7</sup> Foley writes, "[T]he oral singers tell us at least five things. First, memory in oral tradition is emphatically not a static retrieval mechanism for data. Second, it is very often a kinetic, emergent, creative activity. Third, in many cases it is linked to performance, without which it has no meaning. Fourth, memory typically entails an oral/aural communication requiring an auditor or audience. Fifth, and as a consequence of the first four qualities, memory in oral tradition is phenomenologically distinct from 'our memory.'" (Foley 2006, p. 84; quoted in Person 2011, p. 537). Lord gives the examples of saying "please" or "thank you" (Person 2011, p. 537). We do not consciously memorize these responses to social situations. We observe them, internalize them, and in certain situations we perform them as a learned reflex.

Rather than speaking of memorization of traditions, which suggests rote, word-for-word recall, we speak of *internalization*. Internalization happens when a person or group has repeated experiences of a tradition to the point that they embody the tradition in their speech, thought patterns, and even bodily responses. A single word may trigger the entire tradition in a way that a person who has

<sup>7</sup> We distinguish here between cultural, or collective, memory and memory as a cognitive category, such as used in RT. The two are related; see the essays in (Kirk 2018).



internalized a song can imagine the whole song simply by hearing a few notes. This is what Foley calls the “referential function” of a traditional unit (Foley 1991, p. 6). For example, for those who have internalized Psalm 23, all it takes is for someone to say, “The Lord is my shepherd,” and the entire psalm will be brought to mind, along with the situations in which the psalm was performed. It will bring to mind not only words, but emotions, relationships, and experiences. Some will not be able to recite the psalm word for word as an individual but could with others reciting the psalm aloud.

Biblical traditions are those traditions that include and refer to the texts that a group calls “the Bible.” (We note that *which* texts are included in this designation has been a point of dispute even into the 21st century, with, for example, Roman Catholics including the Apocrypha.) The films “The Prince of Egypt” and “Jesus of Montreal” are, by this definition, performances of biblical traditions. Even though they clearly do not follow a biblical text word for word, and one is animated and the other is a complete recontextualization of the story of Jesus, both include and refer to the texts included in the Bible. In this sense, biblical tradition is always plural. (Foley 2015 writes, “‘Oraltradition’ is a very plural noun.”)

When we do speak of “a tradition” we mean it in relationship to other biblical traditions, as a node in a larger network of meaning. Analyzing one text requires unavoidably linking to other texts, with each text representing multiple performances of a tradition in relationship to other performances. From this point of view, rather than speaking of stemma of textual criticism, it is more accurate to speak of each individual manuscript as evidence of a tradition of performing that text. The search for an “original text” does not match the reality of a community that uses a particular manuscript, which may vary from those used by other communities.

#### 4. Method and Epistemology

BPC understands meaning to be produced in a communication event that involves a performer, audience, traditions re-expressed, and a situation. The meaning is always pluriform: the performer and each audience member may experience effects in unique ways and in varying degrees. For example, Mark’s gospel portrays the centurion at Jesus’ cross saying, “This is truly God’s Son!” Scholars have argued whether this is meant to be a statement of faith, irony, or mockery (Iverson 2011; see discussion in Collins 2007). A performer may decide to perform this phrase sarcastically to observe audience responses, which may include:

- Rejecting this interpretation as contrary to experience;
- Taking offense;
- Ignoring the sarcasm and irony and identifying with a confession of faith;
- Hearing it as simply confusing; or,
- Affirming the irony with delight.

Each person will construct meaning based upon the performance event, the specific situation (both locally and culturally), their individual memories triggered (including prior memories of the traditional material, the performer, and the others gathered), as well as their particular cognitive processing of all the above together.

Cultural memory and culturally-shaped processing are essential to understand meaning-making in the performance event. West (2007), Powell (2001), and Spencer Miller (2013, 2015) are helpful in describing the ways audiences process Bible texts differently based on their cultural framework. When we speak of “epistemology” as the study of the production of knowledge, we are referring to a cognitive process within a cultural communication schema. There is no abstract communication; all communication takes place using a culturally determined symbol system by a performer and audience drawing on memories shaped by a culture’s grid that prioritizes and signifies certain values, attitudes, and behaviors over others.

What holds all this meaning-making together is the performance event itself of traditional material. The particular performance event—no matter how diverse the meaning-making—is unitary.

The traditional material—no matter how transformed in the performance event—is still in some degree of continuity with other performances if the audience can recognize it as relating to the tradition. Finally, a third element of commonality is available in the basic biology of the performer and audience. All human beings have basically the same cognitive processing capabilities and bodily resources for communication, such as two hands, five fingers, eyes, mouth, and so on (Perry 2016). We subconsciously depend on our similar bodies and cognitive apparatus to communicate and these make communication across cultures even possible.

Reframed by these realities about human communication, the task of biblical studies, then, is the comparison of performance events, traditions, and/or cognitive processing of traditions. These are the three elements in common that allow for “apples-to-apples” comparisons. We can compare two performances of any material (say, Mark’s passion narrative and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*), based on performance alone, to think about similarities and differences and the impact on audience and performers. The interface between performance of biblical traditions and other kinds of performance has largely been practiced outside the guild of biblical studies. (Artists, writers, theater critics, philosophers, and linguists have been doing it for years.) We can compare two performances of a particular tradition (say, Mark’s passion narrative) to investigate the convergent and divergent effects. Reception Criticism and Reader-Response Criticism have historically operated in this field. We can also specifically investigate how a particular person (or type of person) processed a specific tradition to make meaning in a particular cultural framework. Unwittingly, biblical studies has been operating largely in this third region because of its singular and deterministic outcomes. When historical critics, narrative critics, and others have said, “The text means *this*,” they have unconsciously been saying, “I have processed the text based on my memories, cultural predispositions, and situation and it means *this* to me.”

This suggests that there are three modes of BPC: “analytical,” “heuristic,” and “practical.” The analytical mode of BPC examines the remains of performance events as an archeologist examines an ancient site, looking for clues of the performer, audience, traditional material, and situation, trying to reconstruct the performance event. This mode is similar to what historical critics have done for over a century, using information from the text under analysis in addition to related texts and discoveries from archeology, social sciences, and other critical methods to estimate what a text likely meant to a particular ancient audience.

The heuristic mode of BPC creates contemporary performance events in order to discover what meanings may be produced. This mode may be compared to the physicist who creates quantum events in order to study the interaction of particles in real time. A performer of Mark’s passion narrative may speak the centurion’s words three different ways for an audience, with reverence, shock, and mockery, in order to observe and explore audience reactions to each. We have often called the person who practices the analytic mode the “scholar” and the heuristic mode the “performer.”

The practical mode of BPC is the daily performance of biblical materials that happens every Sabbath and Sunday, every Bible study, every YouTube video and coffee shop conversation when someone performs a biblical tradition, with or without the awareness that they are performing. Ancient lectors and scribes might not have identified themselves as performing, but their activities fit our definition. To the degree that the performers and audiences are aware of the performative nature of the event and reflect on the aspects of performer, audience, tradition, and situation, they are practicing the practical mode of BPC. For example, when John Chrysostom comments on the task of preaching a text, it is a kind of BPC. When someone reflects on producing a Bible YouTube video (voice, pacing, word choice, eye contact, gestures, visuals, etc.), it is a kind of BPC. This kind of practical BPC should be distinguished from the analytical mode; one could analyze a preaching event in the analytical mode of BPC, but this would be different than the preacher’s reflections.

Each of these modes has their own particular production of knowledge, or epistemology. In the analytic mode, knowledge is produced by an analyst creating coherence between data and cultural frameworks of communication. The analyst is the scholar who tries to discover as much as possible

about a performance event: a performer and audience that only may have left traces behind, a biblical tradition encoded often only in texts, and a situation that often is described only in generalizations. Because of the nature of the human brain, the analyst seeks coherence among this data, tries to assemble them like fragments of parchment in the right positions that will allow her to imagine the whole. The framework for assembling these pieces is culturally determined; the performance event will have its own cultural framework of knowledge, independent of the analyst. The analyst also will have a cultural framework. The analyst will inevitably impose her own cultural framework on the performance event, and more so to the extent she is unaware of her own cultural prioritization of values, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, some (myself included) have taken the stories in all four gospels about the women discovering the empty tomb to suggest performance events when Mary Magdalene and the women told the story over and over again ([Hearon 2004](#)). Further data are assembled to describe the kinds of locations and audiences where these witnesses may have told the story, how the sounds were spoken, etc. The data for this hypothesis are the data of female-only first witnesses, with the likelihood of male rejection of their witness (verified by Luke's account), and the larger cultural framework of devaluing women's witness (evidenced by Jewish, Greek, Roman, and later Christian sources). My own cultural framework includes a desire to retrieve women's voices in early Christian stories, which may bias my own reading. The coherence (and thus meaning-making) takes place in the analyst's mind as the data and cultural frameworks are processed. The epistemology may take on the appearance of objectivity, which is seductive for those who want certainty, but the analytical mode is individual and subjective. This is not to dismiss the utility of the analytical mode, but only to emphasize that the analyst should be transparent about their cultural frameworks and predispositions and hesitant about making deterministic or objective claims.

In the heuristic mode, the BPC practitioner creates real-time events to study the pluriformity of meaning-making. The performer may have done some analytical work to hypothesize about the effects on early audiences of a tradition in order to create similar effects on a contemporary audience. Or the performer may want to experiment with different kinds of performance variables to see how they affect the meaning-making in a particular audience. [Swanson \(2004\)](#) suggests that in a reading circle each person takes a different emotion in which to perform a passage. By holding other variables constant, the audience can be engaged to see how the text meant differently by changing the emotion of a performance. In this mode, the epistemology is centered on the relationship between the performer and the audience, fully embracing that the performer's intention may or may not be received by the audience. Meaning-making is indeterminate until after the performance, and even until further processing of the event by interactions between the performance and the audience. Post-performance discussion often becomes the site for conscious meaning-making; in the midst of performance, an audience is often overwhelmed with information and emotion, and often it is the emotion that sticks in a person's mind ([Perry 2016](#)). For example, in my own experimentation with performances of the book of Revelation, audiences have largely not been able to tell me what Revelation was "about," but they would tell me they felt "hopeful," "fearful," "confused," or other similar emotions. With more questions, and conversation among the audience, they are then able to make more declarative statements about the "meaning" of Revelation for them ([Perry 2016](#)). In this way, the heuristic mode of BPC shifts the focus onto the audience's processing of performances.

The practical mode of BPC also has an operative epistemology. Unlike the other two modes, there is no degree of detachment or separation between the practitioner and performer. The performer may not even think of herself as a "performer" of biblical traditions; she just does it and reflects on what she is doing in order to improve the communication effects for her audience in a given situation. The meaning-making for both performer and audience is more focused on the situation. The performer is often moved to deliver the biblical traditions in response to the given situation; the audience expects relevance in the performance. The performer will evaluate the performance event based on how her intentions were realized, or not, for the audience and the extent to which the audience responded as desired. The audience will evaluate the performance event based on expectations and meaning will be

often less about declarative statements than emotion and validation or challenge of values, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, someone who produces a YouTube video of the Gospel of Mark assumes that the performance in the video is useful in some way to viewers, relevant for their time, and that it will make some kind of impact.<sup>8</sup> A person who finds such a video is looking for some kind of impact, which may or may not be satisfied by watching the video. Likely, the creator of the video will give some signal of his intentions and some viewers will leave comments in the thread of discussion that may indicate what impact it had.

## 5. Conclusions

In its analytical, heuristic, and practical modes, Biblical Performance Criticism 2.0 offers a new paradigm for biblical studies that brings together scholars of various critical disciplines and those who perform biblical traditions. It is not necessary to be a specialist in every critical method; each one offers insight into the communication event. BPC provides a way to reintegrate the insights of scholarship into a whole. At the same time, it bridges both theoretically and practically, the gap that has emerged from the academic study of the Bible and its use by communities that perform and receive its traditions.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see Phil Ruge-Jones: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OS\\_hpt\\_xeU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OS_hpt_xeU).

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