

Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds. *The Bible in Ancient And Modern Media: Story And Performance*. Biblical Performance Criticism. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009. 176 pages. \$23.00.

“Performance” has long been a dirty word when it comes to naming what we do when we restore the silent print of the Bible to sound. But under the imaginative and energetic leadership of Thomas E. Boomershine, in whose honor the essays in this volume are written, the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Section of the Society of Biblical Literature has spent the past 25 years uncovering the ancient way of presenting Biblical texts in sound that can best be described as “performance.” The essays by Whitney Shiner, Holly Hearon, David Rhoads, and Philip Ruge-Jones in particular make it clear that the re-creation of oral speech from silent text is a complex business, most of the ingredients of which the practitioners are not consciously aware when they operate within an unquestioned tradition. Or they become aware of those dimensions only when they are exposed to an alternative that for some reason makes them uncomfortable. All oral language involves not only vocal sound with pitch, rhythm, volume, and some form of emotional expression, but body language. And when there is a group of listeners present, there is some form of interaction between the “performer” and the listeners, even if it is physical immobility and emotional detachment.

The key essay for those new to this field of study is Whitney Shiner’s “Oral Performance in the New Testament World.” This essay, adapted from his book-length investigation of the question, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First Century Performance of Mark* (reviewed in *Homiletic*, Spring 2005), describes the cultural ideal for the function of books in ancient culture. First of all, books were not intended for private, silent consumption. They were written to be performed aloud for an audience. What is more, performance normally involved memorization. Statues of orators and playwrights sometimes portray a person holding a scroll as a badge of their profession, but rarely are they shown reading it. Reading itself required a significant degree of memorization given the way the words were written without separation or punctuation. And memorization was the cultural ideal in any case. Descriptions of performances and reading instructions for effective public speaking in the rhetorical handbooks point to a variety of styles, depending upon the context. In an informal, intimate setting, the style might be more subdued than in a formal presentation to a crowd, which clearly “loved flamboyant speaking styles and frequently applauded as much for a speaker’s style as for substance” (51). When it came to narration, the most important rule was “to make the events vividly present to the audience” (54). The handbook *Rhetorica ad Herennium* says:

Varied intonations are necessary, so that we may seem to recount everything just as it took place. Our delivery will be somewhat rapid when we narrative what we wish to show was done vigorously, and be slower when we narrate something else done in leisurely fashion. Then, corresponding to the content of the words, we shall modify the delivery in all kinds of tone, now to sharpness, now to kindness, or now to sadness, and now to gaiety . . . we shall give careful attention to expressing with the voice the feelings and thoughts of each personage (55).

Shiner concludes that “[a]ll New Testament writings are short enough to have been memorized for performance, and because of the expectations of the culture, they probably would have been”

(53). Verbatim memorization would not have been expected, however. The variations among the Gospels provide evidence of a degree of flexibility.

Holly Hearon's essay, "The Storytelling World of the First Century and the Gospels," adds to Shiner's picture, by exhibiting the degree to which the ancient world was a storytelling world. Hearon describes a variety of settings, performers, and functions for storytelling: professional and informal, women and men, entertainment and education and identity formation. She also encourages us to ask the question whose stories got preserved through the medium of writing and whose have been forgotten and the social impact of that preservation and forgetting.

David Rhoads offers the lead essay when turning our attention from "Story and Performance in the Ancient World" to "Story and Performance in the Modern World." He asks, "What is Performance Criticism?" the term he devised for this scholarly discipline. As a scholar who has actually been performing New Testament works for a quarter century, he has set up a dialogue between his present practice and his scholarly study of the rhetorical style of the oral performance of the written texts of the New Testament and the meaning that style generated in the original context. He provides a description of the essentials of a live performance, calls for a reorientation of our methods of studying New Testament texts in light of the oral character of the culture in which they were produced and employed, and finally describes the way in which performance is a method of interpreting the text. When we recognize all the ingredients of oral speech that are not indicated through textual devices, we find ourselves confronted with an entire new set of questions and a reframing of old questions. A given line, for example, may be rendered in a variety of emotional tones, sincerity or irony or sarcasm, for example. Which tone the performer chooses will significantly affect the meaning and response of the listeners.

Philip Ruge-Jones recounts an experience of studying Mark's Gospel in an academic course and how preparing it for performance changed the entire experience of study. For one thing, Mark came to have an impact on the emotional life of the students as well as their mental life. The students' bodies got involved in the story through gesture and facial expression. As a character capable of a range of feelings as he interacts with various people, the students experienced Jesus as a human being. Working together in this way also generated a strong sense of community among the students.

These four articles alone exhibit the need for a paradigm shift in the way we study the Bible. The implications of this paradigm shift for preachers, who are the prime oral communicators of the Bible, is profound. It changes the experience of hearing the scriptures from an effort to take in ideas and information with the mind into an experience of being drawn into an event or a struggle or an encounter with an ancient character and into a relationship with the speaker who is reaching out with voice and body to engage the listeners. This is the ideal dynamic when the preacher performs the sermon. Why is it not the dynamic of the performance of scripture?

Adam Gilbert Bartholomew
Church of the Ascension
Mount Vernon, NY