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## Decoding Digital Narratives: Performance Criticism as a Biblio-Hermeneutical Lens

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores performance criticism as an emerging hermeneutical tool within biblical studies, emphasizing its relevance in the context of digital storytelling. It highlights the ancient oral traditions that shaped biblical texts, arguing that the Bible evolved through storytelling, public readings, and performances. This study underscores the constitutive, epistemic, and critical dimensions of story performance. Through oral performances, biblical stories convey emotional depth and cultural resonance, engaging audiences with their communal and contextual relevance. The text delves into the interplay between performer and audience, illustrating how memory, emotion, and embodiment enhance storytelling. It argues that ancient scribes, far from being mere transcribers, were active participants in preserving and reshaping the stories for their communities. By engaging with the performative nature of biblical texts, Performance Criticism offers a dynamic interpretative framework that integrates historical, rhetorical, and social analyses. Furthermore, the paper advocates for re-appropriating biblical storytelling as a powerful communication paradigm in contemporary faith contexts. The rediscovery of memorization and internalization enriches the performance, fostering holistic engagement that connects mind, body, and spirit. By emphasizing storytelling's transformative potential, the study proposes it as a medium to renew biblical communication and influence cultural paradigms.*

*This hermeneutical approach bridges the gap between ancient oral traditions and modern interpretative needs, making biblical narratives more accessible, engaging, and relevant in today's digital and post-literate culture. Performance Criticism thus emerges as a vital tool for re-imagining biblical communication in ways that resonate across time and cultures.*

**Keywords:** *performance criticism, hermeneutical tool, story performance, internalization*

## 1. Introduction

Narratives have always been the most important way to share cultural identity, values, and knowledge. They range from the softly shared stories of a grandmother to the grand stories of ancient cultures and the core stories of the world's major religions. These stories, whether told around a campfire or in sacred places, were not just written down; they were living, breathing experiences. They were performed with gestures, changes in voice, and participation from the community, connecting the past to the present and shaping the future. In many cultures, the line between the storyteller and the story, the audience and the narrative, was not clear. The Bible as we know it today came from a rich, performative background.

For a long time, biblical scholarship mostly focused on the written text, which was seen as a literary object to be studied using historical-critical and literary methods. Even though these methods have led to important discoveries, they often forget that the biblical stories and teachings first thrived in a lively, oral-performative setting. People talked about them, listened to them, and lived them long before they were written down on parchment. The shift from oral traditions to written texts, and now to the digital age of storytelling, which includes everything from podcasts to TikTok, has changed the way we tell stories without changing the basic human need for them. Still, it has also made a break from the original setting in which the biblical writings were performed.

In this context, performance criticism becomes an important and useful way to understand biblical narratives. Performance criticism seeks to revive the overlooked elements of these narratives by asking, "How would this story have been performed?" instead of treating the text as a static document. It looks at the biblical text not only for what it says, but also for how it is performed, including its rhetorical tempo, character portrayal, narrative structure, and social setting.

This approach creates new ways to understand the text's original meaning and impact by looking at the audience, the performer, and the act of storytelling itself. Performance criticism does not supplant conventional methodologies; instead, it functions as a significant augmentation that rejuvenates biblical narratives, emphasizing their intended experiential nature rather than mere reading. This article will look at the basic ideas behind Performance criticism and show how it can help us better understand the Bible's message.

## 2. Back Drop of Storytelling Tradition

Humans are storytelling beings. That's why humankind is popularly known as '*homonarrans*' (Fisher 1987, ix). Stories are the oldest form of communication in almost all societies. The primitive societies and ancient religions have used storytelling as an important means of education, to transmit and hand down faith to successive generations. Most of the world religions made use of stories in a prominent way. Planthottam (2023, 163) remarks:

Most oriental religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, etc impart their religious teachings through stories. For example: epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, and Panchatantra of Hinduism; the Jataka tales of Buddhism, are replete with stories. Tribal people as well as people in rural societies continue to use stories as an effective means of communication of pedagogical practices, transmitting values, ethical guidelines, religious precepts, and so on.

Hunt considers storytelling as the basis of religious communication. For him, "it is only by re-investing storytelling with intuition and imagination by re-describing the world, that a sense of spirituality can be restored to people" (Hunt 1993, 16). They are the primary vehicles of faith communication.

### 2.1. The Enlightenment and Erosion of Stories

Enlightenment was a movement in the 17th and 18th centuries that focused on reason and evidence from the real world. This focus led to a deliberate rejection of storytelling. As a result, this change influenced the field of Bibliocommunication, where the focus moved from stories and oral traditions to the systematic collection, organization, and sharing of information. Boomershine (2007, 1) argues that the Enlightenment effectively eclipsed the biblical stories, stating: "With the development of the Enlightenment, the meaning of the narratives was divorced from their realistic/figural meaning and focused on their meaning as a reference source for knowing a reality beyond the story." The Age of Reason also supported human logic, reasoning, and scientific methods. During this time, objective and analytical thought were valued more than subjective and emotional experiences, which are often at the heart of storytelling.

### 2.2. New Phase: Story Again!

Even though Enlightenment was all about pure reason, which gets rid of things like smiles, wonder, curiosity, and imagination, storytelling has made a big comeback in the digital age. "The new orality is, in a way, more like the old orality than writing ever was, but it is also a different thing, because it is based on the use of writing and print" (Ong 1991, 136). Digital media is the main reason for this

revival. It lets people create and compose stories in a whole new way. Digital platforms enable individuals to create and disseminate their narratives, by passing the conventional constraints established by print culture.

### 2.3. Media History of Biblio-Communication

The medium of a communication system shapes and even determines the meaning of biblical events/episodes. Boomershine (2011) traces the historical development of Biblio-communication in five distinct phases: oral, manuscript, print, document, and digital.<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.3.1. *Oral/aural communication*

This practice of oral/aural communication influenced the biblical writings in a big way. Jesus' teachings and actions were communicated orally. Almost all the biblical oral/aural communications were open, flexible and fluid (Fowler 2009, 6-7). Each performance of a story or oral/aural communication itself is a unique, new composition (Fowler 2009, 7). "People thought about how they talked, so that what they said could be easily remembered-with proverbs, parables and words that had a ring to them and stories and teachings that were made to sound right and good and that had a great deal of repetition" (Rhoads 2010, 159). In fact, most of the oral communication narratives in the New Testament point to the stories that have risen from personal encounters with Jesus and his activities.

#### 2.3.2. *Manuscript communication*

The original manuscripts of biblical books were written in forms of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek (Coward 2007, 162). The best-known manuscript communication systems in ancient Mesopotamia and hieroglyphics in ancient Egypt were first invented in the fourth millennium BCE; it is believed that Phoenicians spread the use of Semitic Alphabet throughout Mediterranean in the second millennium BCE (Fowler 2009, 9). Manuscripts preserved many oral and aural communication practices, with language remaining flexible and adaptable (Fowler 2009, 10). Although the stories were preserved in manuscript form, it performed well in many situations. Even in 'literate' societies in the ancient world, text was largely performed aloud and received orally rather than read individually in silence (Drapper 2006, 73). However, in this era, biblical communication faced many difficulties. According to John Edappilly (2003, 11-13), manuscript communication era was:

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<sup>1</sup> According to him, the various phases of communication system determine this mechanism of perception in the brain, the process of composition, the social system of production and distribution, and nature of reception by the receivers. Each medium or communication system has different characteristics and distinct type of meaning (Boomershine, "Biblical Storytelling and Biblical Scholarship" [www.gotell.org](http://www.gotell.org) accessed in October 2021)

Period of the development of aristocracy; writing became the possession of the literates. Religion takes over final authority through communication. Parchments and papyrus were made using as writing material. It checked the growth of myths. Also, the influence of monotheism, writing became sacred.

These show that religions, particularly Christianity, enjoyed an authority over manuscript communication. Despite this transition to the manuscript format, the chief qualities that the oral/aural communication tried to promote were retained.

### *2.3.3. Print communication*

The Bible in a printed form has made enormous changes in faith communication. With the print media, the Bible became available to everyday. Individuals began to enjoy the power and right to know the source, learn the truth, develop interpretations, and draw their own conclusions (Stanislaus 2007, 279). At the same time, through this communication, we became inhabitants of the 'Gutenberg Galaxy'.<sup>2</sup> With the arrival of print media, individualism became the centre, knowledge of rationality increased, and religion regained its command (Edappilly 2003, 16). With mass production through print medium, language gradually became ossified in a rational, scientific setting with less emotive and aesthetic elements in it. In this era, the intimate relationship between the medium of communication and the biblical message has been diminished. This is because the text becomes dumb or mute, lending no voice to the words. As a result, the listeners missed by way of experience, knowledge and relationship.

### *2.3.4. Documentary communication*

With the emergence of documentary communication, biblical interpretation became very popular. These documents are made accessible to everybody. Rational learning and conceptual communication became the top-most experience (Stanislaus 2007, 281). It opened many possibilities for individual to study the Bible. During this period, biblical commentaries and dictionaries emerged, and the learning process itself depended heavily on written materials. Print communication made the Bible a document of the past and gave rise to a tendency of 'silent reading.' "The experience of the silent reading involves only the eye and brain" (Shiner 2003, 1). But the whole body is not involved in the process of communication. A book does not know how to judge its audience to know when to speak and when to remain silent (Shiner 2003, 50). The print reduced

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<sup>2</sup> The message of the Bible which came to us in the form of printed books. Its first existence in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Gutenberg printed the first book. Print medium made a communication revolution on that time. To emphasis this context Mc Luhan used the term Gutenberg Galaxy (Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University Press, 1962), 5.

oral/aural world to a world of visualized pages (Ong 1991, 73). It gives documents a feeling of history and theology in documentary communication. Because this biblical communication medium placed too much emphasis on the text's documented character, people's emotional lives lost their vitality and importance.

### 2.3.5. *Digital communication*

With the arrival of digital/audio-visual media, biblical communication took a new turn. Digital communication, according to Boomershine (2003, 2), focuses on two aspects—the centrality of sound and the vivid experience as the criterion of meaning. These two factors make digital communication a compelling experience. This makes the biblical stories a multi-dimensional experience both orally and digitally. Therefore, in the biblical communication context, storytelling and its performance have re-appeared in a new form, where bytes replace the printed text. This calls for a new approach to biblical communication in its exterior as well as interior dimensions and manifestations (Palakeel 2007, 32).

This media history of Biblio-communication establishes that the digital age (Second Orality) has brought back the key traits of oral storytelling in a radical new form.

## 2.4. Similarities between Primary and Secondary Oralities

The new electronic/digital interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village. This return to the oral state is not a regression, but a recovery (Ong 1991, 136). Marshall McLuhan's *the Gutenberg Galaxy: The making of Typographic Man* (1962) also supports this idea. Certain similarities in terms of 'oralities' can be traced out from the biblical scholarships of Boomershine (2015), Perry (2016, 2019), Ruge-Jones (2009), and Rhoads (2010):

*Medium of communication:* Primary orality describes cultures that lack writing, while secondary orality highlights the digital age's technologically mediated communication after literacy.

*Role of performance:* In cultures with primary orality, a storyteller depends on memorization and internalization. Their performance encompasses not only the spoken words but also their body language, gestures, vocal inflections, and engagement with the audience. In the context of secondary orality, the storyteller's voice, tone, and visual presence play significant roles. Digital platforms offer a new experience of immediacy and closeness.

*Reliance on formulaic language and repetition:* Cultures with primary orality frequently use formulaic expressions, mnemonic tools, and repetitive elements to remember and share lengthy narratives. Likewise, secondary orality often incorporates repetition and catchphrases for easy recall and to establish a recognizable style. This repetition renders the content more digestible and shareable, akin to the function of mnemonic devices in primary oral cultures.

*Participatory nature.* In settings with primary orality, storytelling is a collective and interactive event. Similarly, secondary orality also promotes a sense of community and involvement. This illustrates the resurgence of storytelling performance in an evolved format.

### 3. The Foundations of Performance Criticism

The ancient world experienced faith through oral performances. The Bible evolved through an oral story performance. Multifaceted forms of communication have been used in oral performances in the Bible which include private readings, storytelling, public readings, novels, drama, pantomime, poetry and epic, reading in worship, scriptural chant, etc (Shiner 2003, 37-45). The performance events seen in the New Testament stresses the conviction that these texts are most appropriately read as the story of Jesus, the story of everyone else, and the story of God (Lash 1986, 182). In the introduction to his book, *Biblical Performance Criticism*, Rhoads (2010, 1) says, “The oral compositions preserved in the later manuscripts of the New Testament were not originally read privately or silently but were performed in social settings before gatherings of people. The compositions were most likely originally performed by memory, although they may also have been read aloud.”

*Biblical Performance Criticism* evaluates ancient biblical texts as texts created not just for reading but for performance. But at the same time, it should be noted that biblical performance was not merely a process of dramatization, it paved a way for a meaningful interpretation of the text. The meaning of the text was dynamically generated by both the performer and the audience based on their cultural and traditional context. Many biblical scholarships have made it very clear that not all communication events are performances. According to them, what makes a communication event a performance is its re-expression of a tradition. In the words of Jin Han (2025, 1), “Performance criticism investigates the formative force of performative contexts and their elements that contribute to the shaping and reception of the text. In this interpretive methodology, *performance* serves as an inclusive term that covers not only the oral delivery of the text but also the formation of tradition in performative contexts, ancient and modern.” Biblical performance emphasizes not only the role of performance but also the impact of it on the audience.

### 4. Mapping of Story Performance in the Ancient World

There are many pieces of evidence which point to the presence of story performances in ancient Israelite culture and ancient Mediterranean culture. “These cultures valued oral performance much more highly than our culture, and the

ideal for literary performance was purely oral performance” (Shiner 2003, 4). As a result, manuscripts were generally memorized for performance, and they were often recited instead of reading. A few pertinent threads in story performance in the ancient world are mentioned below:

The Hebrew Bible is originated from oral story performances. Later, these performed stories were preserved in writing. According to Niditch (1996, 130), the oral performance, which is dictated to a writer who preserves the text in an archive, creates a fixed text out of an event. There is a slow crystallization of a pan-Hebraic literary tradition through many performances over centuries of increasingly pan-Israelite tales to audiences with certain expectations and assumptions about shared group identity. Later in the process, authors write down shared stories.

The ancient Israelite scribes were popularly known as ‘performers’ (Person 1998, 602). The scribes took part in the storytelling process rather than simply copying the performance events. Scribes in ancient Israel belonged to oral communities. They provide context for the community they were speaking to, even when they reproduced the story performance in writing.

In this sense, these scribes were not mere copiers but were also performers. Rhoads (2010, 3) explains:

The writings now in the New Testament were not originally written or received as scripture. They were treated as story-epics, letters, and a prophetic apocalypse—probably performed from memory. They were handwritten on scrolls between 50 and 100 CE. Many of them were composed orally in performance and then transcribed into writing. The handwritten scrolls served the orality of the culture to signal sound. It functioned as aids to memory retrieval for a performer preparing for performance. They were performed, mostly from memory.

It is evident from the above words of Rhoads that the holy text was composed orally before it was transformed to writing. Story performance in ancient world also emphasized the emotional impact. The performer was expected to feel the emotions of the characters and communicate those emotions to the audience. Shiner (2003, 4) says, “Oral performance of the narrative was in a semi-dramatic style. The dialogue was spoken by characters and inflected to indicate emotional meanings.” The ancient world of the biblical tradition performed orally to transmit their faith, thereby constituting a communication culture relevant to the context. In a broad sense, Elizabeth Bell classifies performance as constitutive, epistemic, and critical (Bell 2008, 18).

#### 4.1. Story Performance is Constitutive

When something is constituted, it is established, created or given a particular form (Bell 2008, 19). The theory of performance claims that it constitutes



communication culture. In Biblical storytelling performances, a communication culture was constituted through the ages. Biblical text was performed for a community in a particular historical context; it was an act of communication, and the story performance evoked meaning among the audience based on their situation (Horsley 2001, 63-64). There are many components which constitute this act of performance event. Story performance involves the performer, the audience and the context; putting flesh and blood into the manuscript includes inflection, pauses, pace, volume, pitch, gestures, posture, facial expressions and movement (Rhoads 2010, 4). According to Rhoads (2010, 4), biblical stories are composed for performance: it is for an oral presentation. The performer embodies the text: every aspect of the performer's appearance, movements and expressions are part of the story. Meaning is negotiated between the performer, the composition, and the audience. The dynamics of the story performance has a potential effect upon the audience. What is evident here is that oral performances were constituted by storytellers. Hence, story performances are a means of knowing the text.

#### 4.2. Story Performance is Epistemic

Story performance is a way of knowing the actual events of the text. Shiner (2003, 2) makes a very significant observation: "Performances present a more realistic portrayal of actual events. We experience a living person before us, one who has something at stake in the performance. We are affected by the speaker's presence and his emotions. We have an opinion of the speaker and that affects how we receive the performance."

The epistemic character of story performance makes the biblical events closer to us. It shapes our thinking and interaction. Moreover, it relates the biblical stories to our life experiences. The act of story performance opens our mind and imagination to new ways of thinking of the biblical events.

Oral traditions, especially the 'midrash tradition'<sup>3</sup> in Judaism, has followed narrative epistemology. This is because most of the rabbis used to deliver or perform their recitations on the Sabbath, when it was prohibited to write it down. In fact, Brandt (1997, 167) remarks:

A consideration of the midrashic tradition in Judaism has much to offer us in comprehending and appreciating how narrative approaches to knowledge and relationship have existed for thousands of years and is yet not just recent

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<sup>3</sup> Midrash is a form of 'rabbinic literature' consisting of a combination of homiletic forms which may include a given text, its presentation, its compositional process or a combination of them all. [E. Tonges, "The Epistle to the Hebrews as a Jesus-Midrash," in *Hebrews Contemporary Methods-New Insights*, ed. G. Gelardini (Leiden Brill, 2005), 90]. It is an expository treaty of a given text that is regularly cited within the work (James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Van der Brock, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Louisville Westminster: John Knox, 1992), 42.

discoveries or passing intellectual fads but true alternatives to dominant technological modes of thought.

What to a modern mind might seem an inferior epistemology is to an ancient Jew only a different one, an epistemology that encourages an alternative, pluralistic imagination.

### **4.3. Story Performance is Critical**

“Performance holds possibilities to... transform a life world and stake claims about that life world” (Bell 2008, 24). Story performance can create a new life world through biblical communication. Whitney Shiner (2003, 171) makes a significant observation that in oral performance, the narrative happens simultaneously in two worlds, the imagined world of the narrative and the concrete social world of the performance context. Therefore, a critical and creative engagement is possible while performing the biblical stories. It can make transformations in audiences or listeners and enter the life world of people of all ages.

### **4.4. Performer-Listener Dynamics in Oral Performance**

The interrelated analytical aspects in the relationship between the audience and the performer have been brought out by Richard A. Horsley, while dealing with the Gospel according to St. Mark. He has treated this as a ‘metonymic concept,’ which means that a part represents the whole (Horsley 2001, 63). According to him, this concept focusses on how social and political realities of the time are reflected and subtly embedded within the text. He examines how seemingly straightforward stories can function as metonymic representations of broader social structures, power dynamics, and historical contexts. This concept moves beyond a purely literary reading of the text, seeking to understand how this text acts as stand-in for, or an indirect representation of the world outside the text. He contends that the audience of the performed Markan narrative could relate to stories told. In the present day, connotations, phrases and experience can be used to re-create cultural tradition. There can be several sub contexts which employ phrases and emotions which relate to a particular community.

Biblical stories were performed for a community. The inherent meaning of the text cannot be regained through modern interpretations. This is because “the performer of an already familiar story, working through standard rhetorical patterns and strategies long familiar to the audience, summoned conventional connotations of cultural traditions in evoking in the audience a meaning that was inherent” (Horsley 2001, 62). This calls for a new approach in finding out the original meaning of the text.

## 5. Biblical Performance Criticism: A New Approach

Story performance is a process that infuses biblical communication with new insights, methods, and expressions. When we trace the history of biblical performance criticism, we could find that biblical texts were learnt and delivered by performers like prophets or story tellers.<sup>4</sup> The way the performer articulated the story was decisive for the listeners to interpret the text. It is a process of getting the original meaning of the text. “The performance metaphor has significant potential for the revitalization of biblical interpretation,” says Stephen C. Barton (1999, 179). Biblical story performance itself can be considered an interpretation of the text. This is because performance event consists of plots, characters, and conversations that are full of eccentricities, intrigue, emotions, and many other interesting traits (Salter 2008, 50). The inherent meaning of biblical text can be traced through the process of performance. David Rhoads and other scholars have developed ‘biblical performance criticism’ as a new approach in this line. Rhoads (2010, 167) espouses:

Imagining a performative event includes the act of performing, the performer, the location, the cultural historical circumstances, and the implied rhetorical impact on the audience. One could re-orient the methods in the light of oral nature of culture and the texts and the key to this re-orientation is to focus on the performative event as a context to re-conceptualize all methodologies like historical-critical, rhetorical, narrative, discourse and social analysis, and ideological criticism. The performer becomes immersed in the ‘narrative world’ of the text, imagining its characters, settings and events, its past and future, cosmology of space and time, cultural dynamics, and its socio-political realities. The dynamics of performing also is taken care of.

The basic aim of performance criticism is to make the biblical communication much more relevant to the present-day context. “In order to recover the Bible’s power, we have to take captive the imagination of readers and interpreters; we must once again attend to the public reading, or performance, of the Bible” (Juel 1997, 5). David Rhoads is one of the pioneers of performance criticism and he elaborated the topic based on the Gospel of St. Mark. Boomershine was the person who strongly advocated for recovering the oral tradition behind the holy text. Richard Horsley combined performance criticism with social and political

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<sup>4</sup> Evidence suggests that ancient recitations were highly expressive, engaging, dramatic, relational, vocal, and dynamic. They were a heightened form of communication. Certain Old Testament prophets communicated dramatically, utilizing an array of gestures and actions to enhance their message (e.g., Ezek 24; Jer 19; Isa 20). Also pointing to original dramatic performances are the various poetic features present in many biblical genres such as alliteration and onomatopoeia—poetic features primarily enjoyed when heard spoken out loud. (<https://www.logos.com/grow/hearing-the-scripture-readers-voice-biblical-performance-criticism-in-the-classroom/> accessed on March 25, 2025)

analysis. Holly Hearon (2009,51) explained how letters (Epistles of Paul) were performed in early Christian communities. The above facts show that the performance of biblical stories is re-emerging in the new communication context.

### 5.1. Re-appropriation of Biblical Storytelling in Christian Communication

Story performance, which was more prevalent in the oral culture, is resurrected as an ideal mode of communication. Modern communication systems have reinforced the need for the re-appropriation of the more appealing, ancient storytelling tradition. Biblical storytelling is lively, memorable, embodied, engaging, and much more effective (Dewey 2009, 152). Sacred texts were not merely read but told and retold, gradually shaping both individuals and communities. The re-discovery of the vitality of oral tradition, learning the stories as sounds and images, telling the stories with passion and excitement was illuminating—not with glaring incandescent glow of the bare bulb, but with the warm, suffusing glow of the flame (Dewey 2009, 150). Re-appropriation makes the age-old stories resound even today through performance and even the oratory skills of the preacher. In the words of Rhoads (2010, 5):

The performer is viewed as an artist. That was certainly true of the performers and orators of the ancient world. The ancient world valued performance at the popular and at the elite levels alike. There is every reason to think that performances of the New Testament compositions in the early church would have been treated in similar ways – not as scripture readings of short passages in worship but as storytelling and poetic-like performances and orations.

### 5.2. Re-Discovery of Memorization/Internalization

One of the basic steps to attain re-appropriation is memorization. Memory is defined as both the ability to recover and the process of recovering information and knowledge (Lee 2010, 3). In the ancient period, people recited and performed biblical stories from their memory. Memorization helps them to retrieve and recall the events. Moreover, it gives them emotional freedom to express through performance. Most biblical storytellers prefer the word ‘internalization’ to ‘memorization’. Internalization enables the performer to absorb the story until it becomes part of his/her spiritual life. The performer is, in fact, in the process of becoming the story, since in the internalization process the story’s structure, images, feelings, and settings can all be drawn upon. Internalization is helpful in identifying the basic formulae of a story. The listener experiences the same effect due to the unique features of storytelling, and he/she too absorbs the story as his/her own. Internalization enables the listeners to retain the scripture effectively. Overall, the re-discovery of memorization/internalization is essential for the re-appropriation of biblical storytelling/performance.

### 5.3. Performing Biblical Stories: Paradigm for Biblical Communication

The biblical story performance can be a meaningful paradigm of our time in many ways. The dynamic and holistic nature of this paradigm makes biblical communication more participatory. As Philip Ruge-Jones (2009, 113) argues:

The impact is holistic. The whole body speaks to each person with their heart, mind, soul and body as well as the whole community. The performance gathers our bodies, our emotions and our lived experiences carrying them for a moment in the story. The whole of our lives finds dwelling places in the spaciousness created by the story.

The Bible can be viewed not simply as a text but as a communication event. This event embraces the speaker, the audience, the text, and a background that eventually results in a meaningful interpretation of the text. According to Peter Perry (2025, 5):

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.

Therefore, performance of the text reveals multiple layers of meaning unlike silent reading of the text. According to Pelias (1992, 159), “The text has a range of possible meanings and a range of possible performances. Through performances, we may be able to identify which interpretations have a consensus, which interpretations are controversial but permitted, and which interpretations constitute a fundamental misconstrue of the possibilities of the text.”

Therefore, performance is crucial to assessing the limits of practical interpretations and providing criteria for making critical findings in judgements over interpretation. In the present context, the Bible has lost its telling or performing nature since we attach more importance to the print version of it. But it is meaningful in the post-literate culture. “Church now tends to think of the Bible as a set of abstract ideas based on the study of canonical documents but divorced from story. The Gospel has lost its original character as a living storytelling of messengers who told the good news of the victory of Jesus” (Boomershine1998, 113). It is only by telling the story that the message becomes a Gospel (Walker 1996, 12). Performing the stories can become a channel for God’s communication in a more powerful and meaningful way.

Narrating biblical stories can result in a cultural transformation and a change in our perception of the world (Evans 2008, 66). Stories are the language of heart.

“Life transformations take place in the heart. To change the heart is to change the world view. To change world view is to change culture” (Evans 2008, 66). Biblical narratives have an impact on society. Since society is formed by individuals, the changes and spiritual growth that occur in individuals will be reflected in the society. Biblical narratives invoke in the minds of the listeners a sort of catharsis that ultimately results in community transformation and healing. That is why Rhoads (2010, 6) observes:

Performance generates transformation not primarily for individuals but for communities. Performances in a communal setting create and solidify community. The community has experienced the performance together; the event becomes part of their social memory. The performer seeks to create or strengthen the communal dimensions of the audience.

Therefore, the emerging paradigm of biblical communication can be an instrument of transformation. By giving space in the pedagogy of faith communication, storytelling can become an effective paradigm.

## 6. Limitations in the Contemporary Context

Performance criticism has its flaws, especially in today’s world, even though it has made a lot of important contributions.

*First, a large part of the original performative context is no longer available.* We can make educated guesses and put things back together, but we can never fully copy the unique gestures, inflections, and audience reactions that went along with ancient performances. This reliance on informed reconstruction suggests that certain interpretations may be solely conjectural.

*Secondly, the intrinsic characteristics of contemporary biblical engagement pose a challenge.* The change from public, group performances to private, individual readings is a major one. Most people read the Bible on their own, in church, or through digital apps, not at a live storytelling event. So, even though performance criticism can help us understand what the text meant at the time, it may not always be directly related to how we read scripture today. Contemporary interpreters confront the task of reconciling this disparity—leveraging the insights from performance criticism to enhance and elucidate a reading experience that is inherently distinct from the original context of the texts’ creation.

## 7. Conclusion

Performance criticism is a method for understanding biblical texts by looking at how they were delivered and understood in their original spoken and heard

contexts. It sees the text as a living script that is meant to be performed, not as a permanent document. Oral communication reflected personal, emotive encounters with biblical characters and the manuscript tradition helped in preserving oral texts. This was followed by print communication when the printed Bible became available to all. The documentary communication era made the Bible a text for private reading. The present-day digital system opens the way for communication through the audio-visual media. Digital storytelling, which emphasizes spoken narratives, visual elements, and interactive storytelling, can be considered a modern manifestation of this ancient practice. Story performance has been constitutive, epistemic, and critical. In biblical performances, a communication culture was constituted through the ages. The epistemic character of story performance is seen in the realistic portrayal of events. Story performance can also create a new life world through biblical communication as seen in the critical approach. It can transform the audience and enter the world of people of all ages. The resurgence of “second orality,” a term coined by Walter J. Ong to characterize a novel form of oral culture facilitated by technology, fosters an optimal context for the innovative application of performance criticism. Emerging as a hermeneutical tool in biblical communication, performance criticism emphasizes the act of performance and its rhetorical impact on the audience. The main goal of performance criticism is to make biblical communication more useful in today’s world.

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