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The Art of Biblical Performance:
Biblical Performance Criticism and the Old Testament Narratives

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1. Introduction: Setting the Stage

For centuries the Bible's essential identity as a book has been taken for granted as a self-evident truth by scholars and lay people alike. But should it be? *Is* the Bible a book?[1] Well, yes and no. Yes, in that we encounter it primarily as words printed on paper, bound between covers, bought and sold around the world billions of times over — or digitally rendered words we read on a device or screen. But it is also *not* a book. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is much *more* than a book. Books are not "living and active."[2] For the word(s) of God to be so they must be enlivened by a voice, a body, a life, a community — in short, through some kind of performance — by the power of the Spirit. And the Bible has not always been a book. Jon Levenson argued a similar point

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1) Twenty-five years ago, Susan Niditch asked a similar question as she laid out the evidence for understanding Israel's textual traditions in light of their interaction with the oral world in which they were composed. She viewed the generally unquestioned view of the Bible's bookish-ness as anachronistic, and argued that "large, perhaps dominant, threads of Israelite culture were oral, and that literacy in ancient Israel must be understood in terms of its continuity and interaction with the oral world." S. Niditch, *Oral World Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 1.

2) Cf. Heb 4:12 (NRS).

by exposing the irony in a common phrase: "The basis of religion in biblical times was not a Bible: the religion in the Book is not the religion of the Book."3) Susan Niditch was more pointed in her critique: "Turning our ancestors into ourselves, we call the Israelites 'the people of the book'."4)

For significant portions of its history the narrative content of the Bible was not primarily encountered in written form, but rather through embodied recitation by a performer, or a group of performers, who incarnated the story before a live audience, in both formal and informal contexts.5) Biblical performance criticism is an emerging exegetical approach that takes seriously both the Bible's oral history and its vitality as the Word of God, and provides a process whereby scholars, pastors, and lay people alike can come to deepen their understanding of a biblical text through embodied enactment.

2. What is Biblical Performance Criticism?

In his recent book, *Insights From Performance Criticism*, Peter Perry begins by introducing biblical performance criticism (BPC) as, very simply, "a way of understanding the Bible."6) Though he goes on to complexify this substantially,

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3) J. D. Levenson, "The Bible: Unexamined Commitments of Criticism", *First Things* 30 (February 1993), 24.

4) S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 1. Edgar Conrad argued similarly for the oral priority of the context of ancient Israel: "'[B]ooks' in the Old Testament are for the ear, not for the eye of the silent reader; unlike the proverbial child, they are to be heard and not seen." E. W. Conrad, "Heard But Not Seen: The Representation of 'Books' in the Old Testament", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 54 (1992), 59.

5) Peter Perry imagines twelve different performance "scenes" in which tradition is passed down through some sort of performance, ranging from Old and New Testament contexts. His Old Testament imaginings include very informal interactions like a father discussing the Ten Commandments with his son, to social contexts like Isaiah wandering around naked for three years, to more formal worship settings and the musician-liturgists preparing to lead psalms. P. S. Perry, *Insights From Performance Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 5-17. I would suggest that he left off the most substantial and formative examples from the Old Testament context, which would have been both formal and informal worship gatherings, at both Tabernacle/Temple, and in local communal gathering places throughout the lands, where the stories were told and passed down. Susan Niditch has imagined the Levites as the tradents, or the stewards of this performative tradition. She offers initial sketches of this model in S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 120-125.

6) P. S. Perry, *Insights From Performance Criticism*, 1.

the explanation appropriately maintains a focus on the Bible as the subject matter of study, on “understanding” as a motivating impulse, and on BPC as a generative path someone can take to accomplish that end. To be more specific, however, BPC is an intrinsically interdisciplinary approach, bringing together several different methodologies — from within and beyond biblical studies — in order to generate new questions and thus new discoveries into both the meaning and formative potential of a given passage in the Bible.

For the purpose of specificity and clarity, my descriptions in this article describe BPC as it is applied to narratives, which is the primary way I have experienced it and contributed to its development. This is not to suggest a *fundamental* distinction between BPC as applied to narratives and BPC as applied to the Psalms or prophetic material, say, but rather to acknowledge different accents, and appropriate distinctions in process and application. A common framework guides BPC regardless of the nature of the text it is applied to, though that framework is still a matter of debate.[7] Thus, from here on out, I will describe the assumptions and priorities that inform its application to the narratives in order to be as clear, concise, and constructive as possible.

From within the field of biblical studies, BPC’s lineage makes it something of a grandchild of form criticism by the parentage of narrative and rhetorical criticism. Form criticism’s emphasis on oral tradition and the importance of genre identification are genetically inherited aspects of BPC. Narrative criticism’s close reading of the text, its sensitivity to patterns in the text, its emphasis on characterization, its elevation of the plot and plot development through tension are similarly recognizable features of BPC. Rhetorical criticism’s understanding of how language (both verbal and nonverbal) is used to persuade an audience toward some desired end is also a core aspect of BPC.

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7) In her published dissertation on BPC and the book of Habakkuk, Jeanette Mathews identifies at least three primary ways BPC is understood and approached by scholars of both testaments. First, theologians have used it as a metaphor for and/or discipleship, using the Eucharist as the object of reflection (Cf. S. Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018). Second, scholars like Mathews herself view performance as a lens to explore “intrinsic performative aspects in the texts as they stand” (J. Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk: Faithful Re-enactment in the Midst of Crisis* [Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012], 57). Finally, other scholars, like myself, Peter Perry, David Rhoads, and others actually perform the biblical material itself, and draw insights from that experience and its process to interpret the passage. This article is a description of this third approach.

BPC draws on other biblical criticisms as well (socio-cultural, historical-critical, reader-response, and others), but it bears closest resemblance to form, narrative, and rhetorical. The others are, perhaps, more like cousins, or aunts and uncles, in that they are related and share important characteristics but they play a less direct role in shaping the values, goals, and methods of BPC.[8)]

BPC's family tree also includes criticisms beyond biblical studies. Orality studies, for example, considers the relationship between textual and oral dimensions of a society, between writing and culture, and the role of social memory.[9)] Performance studies probes the intersection of embodiment, power relations, and identity formation through patterned/rehearsed behaviors done before an audience of some kind. Cultural anthropology explores the nature of human cultures and the underlying patterns therein through a process of cultural comparison.[10)]

In short, BPC is an approach to interpreting the narratives that explores the intersection between text, body, and context — or, as Peter Perry has said, the intersection of "(1) someone speaking, (2) someone hearing, (3) a text, and (4) a social situation."[11)] Thus, it takes into consideration ① the role of orality, memory, and embodied performance as formative influences in the development of the narratives we receive in textual form, ② how the text's latent orality influences our understanding of the genre of the narratives, and ③ how dramatic structure and characterization are expressed through spacing, movement, and gesture in the context of a performance event as a means to persuade and shape an audience.

As far as exegetical methods go, BPC is still a toddler. And — perhaps to carry the lineage/parenting metaphor to its breaking point — it is still growing

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8) For greater detail on how BPC interacts with several classical and contemporary biblical criticisms in mutually beneficial ways (as well as more "iron-sharpening-iron" kinds of ways), see David Rhoads' helpful and important two-part introduction to BPC, published in 2006 (see, especially, Part II), in which he coined the term "biblical performance criticism" (he does not use the metaphor of "lineage," that is my own way of understanding it). D. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part I", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36:3 (2006), 118-133; and D. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part II", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36:4 (2006), 164-184.

9) D. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part II", 168-169.

10) K. A. Kuhn, *Insights From Cultural Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 4.

11) P. S. Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism*, 1.

and developing, refining its vocabulary, testing its limits and weaknesses, and learning to control its balance to safely run and play in the wide world of biblical interpretation. My intention in this article is both to contribute to its development and introduce it to new conversation partners who can further enhance its growth toward maturation.

3. The Narratives are Dramas: Some Evidence to Consider

When we look carefully at a narrative in the Bible through the lens of BPC, what do we see? Many things, in fact. We see the consistent presence of dramatic structure guiding each story — from establishing the setting, to introducing the central conflict, through its development to its eventual resolution, and a concluding dénouement. The plot, which follows this fundamental story arc, progresses through scenes. Scene shifts are indicated by a change of location, the introduction of a new character, or a shift in the temporal flow[12)] — or, often, a combination of these. Each scene progresses primarily through dialogue, almost always between just two or three characters.[13)] There is a narrator who speaks directly to the reader/audience and establishes the setting, introduces characters and cues their dialogue, describes actions taking place within and around the dialogue, inserts subtle details to shift point-of-view or build suspense, and carries the conflict from its development to its resolution. The narrator, as the teller of the story, operates both within and beyond the boundaries of the story. And so, like a priest, stands on the threshold between the past and the present and ushers the story out of memory and tradition into a dynamic encounter in the present moment.

The presence of dialogue and the employment of dramatic structure and plot have long been identified by narrative and literary critics as evidence of the

12) The shift in temporal flow is often accompanied by a shift in location and is generally accomplished in one of two ways. Either it is indicated through the use of ויהי ("and it happened," cf. 2Ki 5:8 as the scene shifts from the palace in Samaria to Elisha's house, ויהי כשמע אלישׁ, "And it happened / when (he) heard / Elisha"), or the reversal of the typical narrative word order of verb–subject to subject–verb (cf. Jon 1:4, after Jonah sets sail toward Tarshish, ויהוה הטיל, "And the Lord / hurled").

13) T. A. Boogaart, "The Arduous Journey of Abraham in Genesis 22:1-19", J. H. Brumm, ed., *Yes! Well ⋯: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future of the Church: Essays in Honor of John W. Coakley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 3-4.

literary (textual or written) character of the narratives. What evidence is there to support the argument that they also point *beyond* the text to a performative history that deserves to be recovered? To address this question, we must take a closer look at the distinctive nature of dialogue and narration in biblical narratives.

First, regarding dialogue. When characters speak, they primarily do so “because they are struggling to accomplish something”;[14] they are motivated by some concern that justifies their speech and action. But of greater significance here is the fact that the characters speak to each other *in the present tense*.[15] Their speech is not the quoted speech of a novel or historical recounting. It reflects the instincts of a playwright. The presence of this kind of dialogue is one indicator of a residual performance tradition.

Second, regarding narration. Thornton Wilder has a unique perspective from which to compare the approach to narration in both novels and plays. He won the Pulitzer Prize as a novelist but won it *twice* as a playwright. He described the difference this way: “Novels are written in the past tense. [The] constant running commentary of the novelist (‘Tess slowly descended into the valley’; ‘Anna Karenina laughed’) inevitably conveys to the reader the fact that these events are long since passed over. The novel is a past reported in the present. On the stage it is always now.”[16] Barker adds, “A novel or story … is what *took* place. A play is what *takes* place.”[17]

The verbal system of Biblical Hebrew may favor the dynamics of a play script

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14) J. Barker and T. A. Boogaart, *Performing the Plays of the Bible: Seven Ancient Scripts and Our Journey to Return Them to the Stage* (Jacksonville, FL: Webber Institute Books, 2020), 7.

15) The verbal system of Biblical Hebrew is not tense based. The kinds of verbs that appear in dialogue, however, describe action that is unfinished or incomplete, which associate, at least in English, to the present tense. This would primarily include the imperative, the participle, and the imperfect, but could also include the infinitive and *vav*-reversive. This practice of recasting stories from the past using the present tense has parallels in other ancient contexts. For example, Kevin Robb has shown how Heraclitus, working in the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C.E. in Ephesus, a “protoliterate society,” used “the present tense in describing the activities of long-dead figures: Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus.” K. Robb, “Preliterate Ages and the Linguistic Art of Heraclitus”, K. Robb, ed., *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy* (La Salle, IL: The Hegeler Institute, 1983), 157.

16) T. Wilder, “Some Thoughts on Playwriting”, T. Cole, ed., *Playwrights on Playwriting* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 114. Quoted in J. Barker and T. A. Boogaart, *Performing the Plays of the Bible*, 139.

17) J. Barker and T. A. Boogaart, *Performing the Plays of the Bible*, 139.

as opposed to a novel or a story. Not only do characters speak using the Biblical Hebrew equivalent of the present tense in dialogue, but the dominant verb form used by the biblical narrator is a version of the *imperfect* — the *vav*-consecutiv e.[18] There is certainly dispute about the origins and exact functions of this peculiar verb form. As I have argued elsewhere,[19] I believe the use of this unique verb in biblical narrative can be clarified by the context of performance and the culture of ancient Israel. Any performance of the tradition — whether it took place in formal worship at the Temple or Tabernacle, or more informally in a family gathering, or a communal space at a city gate or wherever the elders gathered the community to pass on the traditions — would have served

> to sustain the community's memory and facilitate an encounter between the people and God. The stories were told as a way to honor and remember their ancestors. Perhaps the stories are narrated using "present tense" verbs because they mediate the presence of God so that the gathered congregation is made contemporary with the story. ⋯ The story did not happen once in the past and now is over and done. The story "happens" every time the people gather to (re)enact it.[20]

In performance, body and language and tradition conspire in space to collapse time, bringing the past into the present to make a new now, which is performance time, history reenacted.[21]

In addition to the distinctive character of narration and dialogue, BPC shines a light on the central role of movement and gesture as carriers of meaning that give visible and physical expression to the themes and theological affirmations of each drama. Movement and gesture refer to all of the manifold ways bodies and voices work together in space and time to communicate. This includes, for example, eye contact, hand movements, vocal or physical pauses, body posture,

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18) The biblical narrator will also employ more explicitly present tense verb forms, such as the participle. Cf. Jon 1:13.

19) T. West, *Biblical Hebrew: an interactive approach* (Wilmore, KY: GlossaHouse, 2016), 63-70.

20) Ibid., 70.

21) Performance critic Marvin Carlson described the re-enacted nature of performance as a sort of "ghostliness." "The retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the reexperience of emotions already experienced, these are and have always been central concerns of the theatre in all times and places." M. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3.

proximity between bodies/objects, tone of voice, facial expressions, touch, and much more.[22] These actions have *interpretive* power in performance, and the rehearsal process helps identify these themes by raising questions that occur primarily through attempts to communicate the words with body and voice. For example, how does Isaac get off of the altar between Genesis 22:13a and 22:13b? He is bound, so he cannot get himself down. The narrator does not describe this important action and so it can be glossed over easily by a reader — even a careful reader. But the actor playing Isaac, who is lying bound on the altar, cannot help but ask the question! One compelling answer performance affords resonates deeply with the theme of Genesis 22 in both its Jewish and Christian contexts. Abraham is holding the slaughter-knife. Abraham desires that Isaac get off the altar immediately. What would prevent Abraham from using the knife to *cut the cords that bind Isaac*? To do so enacts a theme with resonance in and beyond this story: the great reversal.[23] The instrument intended for Isaac's destruction becomes the means of his liberation. Christians have interpreted this story as a Good Friday text for centuries, and this performative insight deepens the connection. But the narrator of Genesis 22 does not *tell* us this, because the art of biblical drama is to show instead of tell.

The significance of the actor's body as a locus of meaning in performance cannot be overstated, particularly in light of the profoundly disembodied state of the academic study of the Bible today, particularly in the West. For too long Western scholarship has existed under what performance critic Dwight Conquergood called "the hegemony of textualism."[24] Under its rule, the

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22) Over a century ago, Hermann Gunkel was sensitive to these dynamics as he reflected on the relationship between text and performance in light of the oral tradition. "We must recall at this point that we are dealing with *orally recited stories*. Between narrator and hearer there is another link than that of words; the tone of voice talks, the expression of the face or the gestures of the narrator. ⋯ Modern exegesis is called to the task of *reading between the lines* the spiritual life which the narrator did not expressly utter." H. Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*, W. H. Carruth, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 62. Emphasis added.

23) There are a variety of ways reversals are expressed in biblical narratives. Tom Boogaart has developed a (unpublished) perspective on "dramatic irony" rooted in the retributive worldview of the people of Israel ("you reap what you sow") that is less a literary technique as it is the dramatic working out of biblical cosmology. Examples include: Goliath killed by the one he intended to kill (1Sa 17), Daniel's opponents eaten by the lions they intended to eat him (Dan 6), Haman hung on the gallows he built to hang Mordecai (Est 7), fire burning the ropes that bound Shadrach and his companions (Dan 3), etc.

viceroys of dissection and analysis reign supreme, dictating that the only body parts required to operate the machines that grant access to meaning are eyes and brains. Hands are important too, to write down what the eyes see and the brain thinks. BPC calls for a sort of paradigm shift, which would bring the analytical tools of the academy into conversation with *the whole body* and the full range of human emotions, thereby eliminating the binary of theory and practice, objectivity and subjectivity, analysis and engagement. This shift offers the academy and the church a potential avenue for recovering a more embodied epistemology.[25)]

In conclusion, I am suggesting that the narratives in the Hebrew Bible exhibit a distinctly dramatic character — that they are more akin to drama than (his)story. They are like the scripts of ancient plays dramatizing Israel's sacred, ancestral traditions, and it is profitable to explore ways of interpreting them that are likewise dramatic and embodied. The implications of this are implied in David Rhoads' insightful application of a familiar axiom: "[T]he medium is part of the message, if not the message itself. Studying these texts in an exclusively written medium has shaped, limited and perhaps even distorted our understanding of them … Taking oral performance into account may enable us to be more precise in our historical re-constructions and more faithful in our interpretations."[26)] BPC is an emerging methodology in biblical studies which offers a way to do precisely that. In the following section I explain the method of BPC as applied to the Bible's dramas.

4. The Method: Steps to Interpretation

The following steps describe a somewhat linear, somewhat circular process.

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24) D. Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research", *The Drama Review* 46:2 (T174, Summer, 2002), 147. According to Conquergood, this textual hegemony is supported by the "visual/verbal bias of Western regimes of knowledge [which] blinds researchers to meanings that are expressed forcefully through intonation, silence, body tension, arched eyebrows, blank stares," etc. D. Conquergood, "Performance Studies", 146.

25) Conquergood offers a nuanced perspective on what is needed, and what performance studies can contribute. "The performance studies project makes its most radical intervention, I believe, by embracing both written scholarship and creative work, papers and performances. We challenge the hegemony of the text best by reconfiguring texts and performances in horizontal, metonymic tension, not by replacing one hierarchy with another." Ibid., 151.

26) D. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part I", 126.

Steps 1-4 overlap and interact dynamically with each other to prepare for the performance (step 5), but the post-performance analysis (step 6) very well could (should?) lead back to revisiting steps 1-4 en route to another performance, and so on.

4.1. Step 1: Select/Translate/Format the Script

The first step is to choose which drama is to be performed. This decision will be based on the performance context, the length of time available, the performance space, number of actors vs. number of characters,[27] etc. Once the drama is selected the boundaries of the script must be determined. Every drama has a beginning, middle, and end, though this can be obscured by versification. Performances can be done in the original Hebrew, or in translation. If Hebrew is chosen a translation should be read to the audience beforehand to facilitate understanding. I prefer to use my own translations in order to keep intact idiomatic expressions in the Hebrew that imply concrete actions. For example, in 2 Kings 5:1 the Narrator describes Naaman as being "highly respected" (NAS) or "highly regarded" (TNIV) by the king. The Hebrew phrase ונשׂא פנים means "his face was lifted up." Rather than abstracting the translation for a silent reader ("highly respected"), I translate this literally, and the figurative meaning is communicated physically through a gesture in performance (the king gestures for the prostrate Naaman to rise and speak). The script should be formatted to highlight its dramatic character, identifying the progression of dramatic structure, scenic development, indenting dialogue to set it apart from narration, etc. See below for an example script.

4.2. Step 2: Internalize the Script

Before a biblical drama can be performed it must be internalized.

27) There is no need to be pharisaical about having the same number of actors to characters, however. Certain actors can play multiple characters if their transitions are obvious. Also, Narrators, as quasi-omniscient participants in the drama, can fill in for various parts, and can also play the role of God. Characters could offer their own narration to introduce their dialogue, etc. Similarly, there is no need to associate the gender of the actors with the gender of the characters. When gender, identity, or power are explicit themes in the text, playing with the gender of the actors playing the characters could contribute to the meaning made by and through the performance.

Internalization is more than memorization, which often maintains a *visual* and cognitive relationship with the passage in which a performance is akin to *reading* the words from the back of one's eyelids. Internalization involves 'writing' the words on the heart. It means practicing what Tom Boogaart has called "hospitality of the heart."[28] Internalization is subjective engagement to the degree that the words become part of the performer, where the script is another subject with whom the interpreter has a relationship characterized not just by analysis, but by intimacy and love as well. As a Christian scholar teaching in a confessional seminary context, I consider this essential.

4.3. Step 3: Block the Script

'Blocking' refers to the various staging decisions required to facilitate the performance. It includes the arrangement of the stage, the locations where actors stand, when they stand there, when and where they move or speak (and how fast), etc. It has to do with the entire physical, spatial dimensions of the staging of the script, but also includes intangible elements such as tone of voice, dramatic silences or pauses, pacing, etc. Every blocking decision has exegetical and interpretive consequences. For example, consider the differences between two hypothetical scenes from Genesis 22:2. First, God stands at a distance and, with head down, hesitantly mumbles to Abraham: "Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac …" And secondly, God kneels beside Abraham and speaks the same words with compassion, urgency, and gravity.[29] The differences between the two scenes are theological and significant. It is through

28) See T. West, "Hospitality of the Heart: How Changing Our Metaphor Can Change Our Relationship With the Bible", D. Keepers, ed., *Before the Face of God: Essays in Honor of Dr. Tom Boogaart* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Church Press, 2019).

29) Part of the beauty and power of BPC is that along with these two opposites lay a hundred other possibilities. How did God communicate this profoundly unsettling message to Abraham? How did Abraham respond? I often split students or workshop participants into multiple performance groups and assign the same passage, which they will perform for each other. Inevitably the performances are different, which provides occasion for deep, engaged, and often very insightful exegetical conversation on the passage. For example, a recent performance of Elijah passing the mantle to Elisha in 2Ki 2:1-18 came during a semester in which my seminary transitioned to a new president *and* dean. The anxiety that Elisha and the prophets exhibited in that passage, which the students *experienced* through performing it, intersected with the historic moment of our seminary in profound ways, allowing the story to speak beyond itself to a similarly uncertain transition of power.

this process of blocking the performance that the actors truly begin to 'enter' the script as the world of the drama materializes in rehearsal.

4.4. Step 4: Research the Script

The process of blocking out the script inevitably raises important questions related to culture, social customs, history, and language. It likewise reveals issues related to power, geopolitics, socioeconomics, identity, community, vulnerability, and marginalization. Many of these issues cannot be resolved simply by *more rehearsal*, yet must be expressed in performance. BPC has its own integrity as a critical methodology but is in constant dialogue with other disciplines. This is a point at which this dialogue becomes essential.

4.5. Step 5: Perform the Script

The performance is, of course, the most important step in the process, and the event toward which every other step is directed.[30)] The presence of a live audience makes the performance event fundamentally different from rehearsal, increasing the energy by increasing the stakes for the performers. A live audience also creates a real-time feedback loop for performers as people react to the performance in ways that may be similar or different from the intentions or expectations of the performers. This is a dynamic that often leads to new insights on the part of the performers *as they perform*.[31)]

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30) To view various performances online, visit my YouTube page at WTSHebrewPlayers and the playlist titled "Scripture Enactments" where you can find performances from Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, Jonah, 2 Kings, and even the Psalms. See also the "Drama" playlist on Greg Edge's YouTube channel for Jeff Barker's work with college students.

31) For example, in a recent performance of Rut 2 I was playing Boaz (I am 2 meters tall, with long arms). Before the performance, which was in Hebrew, we did a series of tableaus to introduce the blocking while the story was read in English. When Boaz was introduced, I walked onto the stage (an oblong space with audience on both sides), smiled, and froze with my hands up in the air as I had always done in rehearsal (his line is "the Lord be with you!"). The audience was looking the other direction at Ruth and Naomi and did not see me enter. When the narrator motioned towards me, and the audience turned to look, everyone burst into laughter! I was completely caught off guard. With that outburst of joy at the beginning, the audience set the tone for the rest of the performance, and we began to play up the humorous parts a bit more than we had prepared.

4.6. Step 6: Analyze the Performance

The final step of the process is to critically reflect back on the entire process. If the performance was done by an ensemble cast, it is beneficial to debrief the performance event with the entire cast, and, if possible, with the audience as well — especially if the performance takes place in communal worship. Like any form of art, more is communicated than is intended. Reader-response criticism has raised the challenge to historical-criticism's hyper-focus on a single, original meaning by arguing that, to a certain extent, interpretation is in the eye of the beholder. David Rhoads suggests that BPC shift reader-response to "audience-response" in order to compensate for the shift from silent readers to participatory audiences that help performers locate and communicate meaning in the drama.[32] One way I have engaged this explicitly with an audience was during a Sunday evening service featuring a performance of the Binding of Isaac (Gen 22). As we were explaining the process to the congregation before the performance, we discussed the climactic binding scene. The Narrator does not say whether Isaac resisted or submitted, whether Abraham surprised Isaac or beckoned him over while holding the rope. So, we presented two options to them, one in which Isaac resists, and one in which he submitted. We asked them which version they thought was more authentic, and which they preferred we include in the full performance. Not surprisingly, they chose the passive/submissive Isaac, because it is much more palatable. But the text's silence leaves the question open to interpretation.

5. An Example of Biblical Performance Criticism: Exodus 17:1-7, Water From the Rock

Exodus 17:1-7:

CONFLICT

[1]All the congregation of the children of Israel set out in stages from the wilderness of Sin upon the command of the Lord. They encamped at Rephidim. But there was no water for the people to drink.

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32) D. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part II", 167.

DEVELOPMENT

Scene 1

[2]And the people quarreled with Moses, saying,

Give us water! Let us drink!

And Moses said to them,

Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?

[3]But the people thirsted there for water. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying,

Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?

Scene 2

[4]And Moses cried out to the Lord, saying,

What can I do with these people? In a moment they're going to stone me!

CLIMAX

[5]And the Lord said to Moses,

Pass in front of the people and take from them the elders of Israel. And the staff with which you strike the Nile, take it in your hand and go. [6]Behold, I will be standing over there, in front of you, on the rock of Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come from it, and the people will drink.

And Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.

RESOLUTION

Scene 3

[7]And he called the name of the place Testing[33] and Quarreling,[34] because the children of Israel quarreled and because they tested the Lord there saying,

Is the Lord in our midst or not?

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33) מסה, "testing," cf. v. 2.

34) מריבה, "quarreling," cf. v. 2.

5.1. Conflict

All drama is driven by tension, which is an effect generated by the introduction of conflict. "Conflict is central to drama," writes David Ball.[35] Biblical performance criticism compels the interpreter to pay careful attention to the conflict and the tension that results from it. This requires more than an intellectual articulation of the conflict; it involves moving beyond passive recognition to active connection. Tension cannot be thought, it must be *felt*.

Biblical dramas typically open with a brief description of the setting into which the conflict will be introduced. Often, this narrated introduction establishes an initial equilibrium, which will be upset by the conflict, and will be returned to when the conflict is resolved. The conflict is generally theological in nature (even when God is not a character in the drama or explicitly mentioned at all, as in the Book of Esther) and provides a window through which the people of Israel sought to discern God's presence in the moments of everyday life, whether in feast or famine, city or wilderness, peace or war, the palace of the king or the home of a poor widow. In our example from Exodus 17, the conflict is introduced in the opening verse: "*there was no water for the people to drink*."

Although Exodus 17:1–7 is a relatively short drama, the conflict is multi-faceted. The obvious problem is that the people are stuck in the barren, hot, unforgiving wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula without water.[36] If this problem is not remedied, the people, their children, and their livestock will not have long to live.[37] But this physical reality has a theological source: *God* led

35) D. Ball, *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 25.

36) Or, perhaps, without access to water. It is conceivable, as Nahum Sarna proposes, that water was available but the Amalekites — with whom the Israelites make war in the second half of Exo 17 — prevented their access to the available water sources. Cf. N. Sarna, *Exodus*, the JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 93. This hypothesis is possible, but there is no mention of external hostility in the story itself, which casts doubt on this suggestion as unnecessary conjecture. Perhaps we can simply take the story at its face value and assume the Lord led the people to a place where there was no water (there is no way to know either way, as the location of Rephidim is uncertain, and water sources have a way of changing over the course of millennia), just as they were led to a place that had no bread or meat in the previous chapter, and God miraculously provided manna and quail (Exo 16).

37) Cf. Exo 17:4.

the people into this situation. Here the Narrator is explicit. The people moved from Sin to Rephidim “upon the command of the Lord” (v. 1). The Hebrew word translated ‘command’ is actually פֶּה (*peh*, ‘mouth’).[38] They travelled “upon the *mouth* of the Lord” — as the Lord had commanded them to do. The Israelites, having just learned that God is the provider of their daily bread (Exodus 16), now “proceed from the mouth of the Lord”[39] into the wilderness.

The drama unfolds in a way that indicates the people do not understand that the Lord has led them to this place. The Narrator informs the audience of God’s guidance, but there is ostensibly no mention of this to the people themselves. This introduces the possibility of irony, which is dependent upon the exclusive knowledge of some played against the ignorance of others. The audience is in on the Lord’s action from the beginning, but the people are left in the dark. Thus, the conflict that develops is multi-layered. Within the boundary of the drama, the conflict the characters endure is physical (imminent death by thirst), interpersonal (the people quarrel with Moses), and theological (God appears to abandon Israel to this fate). The tension felt by the audience is somewhat different, however, because they know of God’s participation (they see God lead the people to Rephidim), hear God speak to Moses (unlike the other characters), and witness God’s presence and movement within the drama. Perhaps the conflict the audience endures is the age-old question of theodicy: Why does God allow the people to suffer in this way when God was present with them the entire time?

5.2. Development

The conflict introduced at the beginning intensifies by means of dialogue, contrasted points of view, movement and gesture. Eventually the tension builds to a breaking point — the climax — when the tension is released, and the conflict is resolved. This event marks a change in the fortune of the protagonist, who through it moves from danger to safety, ignorance to knowledge, sickness to health, captivity to freedom. The change can move in the other direction as well, from health to sickness, and so on.

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38) The entire phrase is עַל־פִּי יהוה.

39) Cf. Deu 8:3.

In the present drama, the conflict develops in verses 2-4, and reaches its climax in verses 5-6. The dialogue in verses 2-4 clearly identifies the expansion and development of the conflict surrounding God leading the people into a location that cannot support them. A rift is exposed between the people and their leader. Further, each characters' speech articulates their respective points of view, which intersect violently and render the conflict more explicit. The people equate the present danger with Moses' leadership and hold him at fault (v. 3). Moses interprets their fear and violence as testing the Lord (v. 2). The people's discontent then spreads throughout the camp as insidious murmuring (לון, v. 3), which almost culminates in their mutinous assassination of Moses by stoning, as Moses reveals in his prayer to God (וסקלני, "and they will stone me," v. 4). Tone of voice further elevates the audience's experience of the conflict: as the people scream at Moses they betray their desperation and the volume of their voices elevates the audience's emotional and bodily experience of the tension. In other words, the tension is *felt*, and it is uncomfortable.

Movement and gesture likewise combine to reveal and intensify the conflict. Consider verse 3 in which the people murmur against Moses — almost to the point of stoning him. The audience's *experience* of the tension here is critical as preparation for the emotional and theological shock of the climax (discussed below). Imagine the scene in verse 3 unfold. What does a murmur *sound* like? What does it *look* and *feel* like when a large group of people murmur and conspire against a single individual? An ensemble cast has at its disposal a number of tools to demonstrate the tension and fear both Moses and the people feel in this moment. Two of those tools are: sound and repetition.

The opening phrase of the people's murmur is לָמָּה זֶּה ("Why is this?"). The people are dispersed around the stage in varying stages of exhaustion and uncertainty. One turns to another, looks around, and whispers loud enough for all to hear: לָמָּה זֶּה? He says it again, almost hissing.[40] Others pick up the phrase so that it begins to pepper the space unevenly, slowly building but still chaotic. People begin to stand up and move together, picking up stones strewn across the stage. Someone points to Moses and the energy focuses on him. The

40) The 'z' sound in זֶּה works well to infuse the space with a sort of 'buzzing' sound. If the performance is done in English, the double 's' sound in 'Why i*s* thi*s*' and the breathy '*wh*' are also effective.

murmur builds and builds in intensity and coherence until, with one voice, gathered as a mob before Moses, they cry out: לָמָּה זֶּה!! Various individuals chime in to complete the lines, since the dialogue includes first person suffixes ("my children," "my cattle"). For a silent reader these two words in Hebrew are easy to pass over to get to the object of their fear: death. But sound and repetition, combined with movement and gesture allow the emotional weight of the conflict to be felt, which builds the audience's empathy for the people and their desperation *and* for Moses in his unenviable position as their leader. The audience leans in, wondering how Moses will get out of this jam; or perhaps they lean back, covering their eyes, not wanting to watch. Either way, the audience is *engaged*, drawn into the unfolding conflict by a heightened awareness of the tension expressed through bodies, voices, props, time, and space.

After Moses' prayer, God tells Moses to re-engage the people (who probably still have stones in their hands!) and to separate the elders from the people. The elders will witness the miracle; the people will not. Staff in hand, Moses is instructed to walk to where God will be "standing ⋯ upon the rock of Horeb." 'Horeb' is often used to refer to Mt. Sinai, but can also refer to the region around it. The exact location is unknown.[41] And the exact location of the rock is less important to the Hebrew composer than what happens at — or on — it. What are we to make of the fact that God will be 'standing' on the rock? Dismissing it as ancient anthropomorphism is misguided for it is clearly a stage direction, explicitly identifying not only God's location on stage but also God's posture. God *stands* 'upon' (perhaps 'before') the rock which Moses is to strike.

5.3. Climax

God is so clear about God's location and posture because it is the single most important part of the story, and if it is not seen it will likely be missed. God is explicit about standing on/before the rock because God wants Moses (and the storyteller wants the audience) to know that God is placing Godself between the rock and the people's thirst, between the rock and Moses' staff: Moses's staff must go through God's presence to reach the rock. Moses is instructed to strike

41) N. Sarna, *Exodus*, 14.

God. A Christian reading of this moment would see in it an anticipation of the sacrificial love of God offered in Jesus on the cross to save the world.[42] This is certainly how the Apostle Paul interpreted it: "For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, *and* the rock was Christ."[43]

How does Moses approach the rock to strike it? Is he eager? Terrified? Hesitant? Desperate? Concerned? The performer must choose, and to do so must enter fully into the moment in all its emotional weight.[44] I have often employed the freeze frame or tableau — a performance technique in which a visually evocative scene is created by the bodies of the performers and held throughout a portion of narration.[45] A common tableau we have used in worship services begins with God standing near the baptismal font, representing the 'rock of Horeb.' Moses hesitantly approaches God, slowly turns the staff around in his/her hands, and then quickly brings it down on God's head/shoulders, stopping with the staff hovering inches from the God character's body. At that moment the actor playing God may open their hands over the font, or may pick up a pitcher and fill the font. Perhaps the narrator brings in a blue cloth and lays it out before the elders (this cloth could be used earlier and removed by the narrator in verse 2 upon saying "there was no water for the people to drink," creating a visual *inclusio*). The moment is full of pathos and tension, which gives way to relief.[46]

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42) See T. West, "Unseen Grace: Lent in the Book of Exodus", *Perspectives* 26:3 (March, 2011), 5-8. This was also Max Harris' read on this passage. He argued that the Bible "abounds in smaller instances of such theatricality. That, for instance, the invisible God stood against the rock at Horeb in front of the elders and people of Israel and allowed himself to be beaten with Moses' rod so that water might flow from the rock to assuage Israel's thirst (Exo 17:1-6) has been interpreted as both an immediate gracious provision for material need and a carefully staged figurative enactment of Jesus' crucifixion and the consequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joh 7:37-39; cf. 1Co 10:4)." M. Harris, *Theater and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 9.

43) 1Co 10:4, NRS; emphasis added.

44) I recently worked with a church group to perform this story for a Sunday morning worship service. When we were blocking the climax, the woman playing Moses balked at God's command for Moses to strike God. She wanted nothing to do with striking God. It was visibly painful for her to even consider it. But the more she sat with it, the more we rehearsed it, the more profound it became to her. During the performance on Sunday morning, she had tears streaming down her face as she held the staff above God's head in our "strike" tableau. It was a powerful moment. She will never 'read' this story the same again.

45) This can be an effective, non-threatening way to introduce performance to a community that is unfamiliar with it.

Eventually everyone drinks and all are saved. The climax transforms death into life. The climax also contains a profound yet subtle reversal. The staff, which represents God's life-giving power ("the staff with which you struck the Nile") now becomes a *weapon*; and the stone, which represents death (the harsh conditions of the wilderness and the object of the people's violence ["in a moment they're going to stone me!"]) becomes a font of life-giving water. The stick-of-life becomes a weapon through which the stone-of-death pours out life-giving water. Sticks and stones weighing the balance between life and death.

5.4. Resolution

Moses does not name the place "Living Water" or "Spring of Our Salvation," as other place names commemorating a theophany might lead one to expect.[47] Moses memorializes not God's miraculous intervention, but the people's faithless rebellion, drawing attention to it as the context in which God's presence and sacrificial love was manifested, despite the people's lack of faith.

Similar to the Book of Jonah,[48] this drama concludes with dialogue in the form of a rhetorical question spoken by the people that drips with irony and poignancy. "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" the people cry. This question justifies Moses naming the place *Massah* and *Meribah*, instead of, say, *Mayim Chayim* (Living Water). The composer's decision to conclude the drama with

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46) With respect to the miracle itself, John Walton is certainly correct to point out that "[s]edimentary rock is known to feature pockets where water can collect just below the surface. If there is some seepage, one can see where these pockets exist and by breaking through the surface can release the collected water." J. H. Walton, V. H. Matthews, and M. W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 92. But the composer is unconcerned with a geological explanation. The narrative gap reveals a theological profundity when it is seen in performance: The earth is full of the steadfast love of God (Psa 119:64). So much so that it can transform a rock into a stream of life-giving water. The story tells of a miracle of theology, not geology.

47) Cf. Abraham naming the place of Isaac's near-sacrifice יהוה יראה ("The Lord Will Provide") in Gen 22:14; or the well of Hagar's salvation being named באר לחי ראי ("Well of the Living One Who Sees Me") in Gen 16:14; or Jacob naming the place of his revelatory dream בית־אל ("The House of God") in Gen 28:19.

48) Jonah also ends with God's question to the wayward prophet Jonah who preferred his own death over the Ninevites' conversion. "And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city, which has within it more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many cattle besides?" (Jon 4:11).

this line — instead of where it was actually uttered in the chronology of the story — is both intentional and profound.

The poignancy and irony of this dramatic conclusion, and its relation to the conflict surrounding God's presence, is made unavoidably evident through performance. The miracle takes place 'in the eyes of the elders,' which implies the people do *not* see it. The people, perhaps standing down stage facing the audience (with their backs to the rest of the stage), ask if God is even present among them *while God is behind them* with Moses and the elders having just offered Godself in love for their salvation. The God who opens his mouth to lead them into the wilderness (v. 1) now opens his hands to save them from death, but the people do not have the eyes to see or the faith to believe. Do we?

6. Ancient and Modern Performances

An important and ongoing point of conversation among scholars committed to or interested in BPC concerns the nature of the relationship between ancient and modern performances. Are modern performances a purely exegetical or heuristic tool enabling deeper insight into a text for a modern audience? Or, are modern performances a way to explore the dynamics of ancient performances (the ancient performer's understanding of the script, an ancient audience's reception of a performance, various performance contexts, etc.)? Or, is it a combination of these?

My own sense is that it is not an either/or equation. Modern performances clearly benefit the exegete but can also benefit the scholar more interested in the ancient performance context. My personal investment is more in BPC as an exegetical method, enabling deeper insights into the biblical text, and fostering intimacy with the Bible. This is partly due to my role as a seminary professor where my job is to form women and men to lead the church in mission. BPC is a powerful tool with extraordinary potential to create meaningful opportunities for students, pastors, and lay people to *experience* the Bible as "living and active." Further, it provides a way to hold the tension between analysis and intimacy, dissection and devotion. Through performance you learn much about the Bible even as you steep yourself in its story.[49] In this way it holds great potential to serve as a bridge between the academy and the Church. To participate in a

performance of a drama is to have your relationship to that passage forever changed. To have your hands bound and your body forced onto an altar as your heart beats faster and faster will forever affect the way you "read" the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. And, when you perform a story, you realize Jeff Barker was right when he said: "You cannot faithfully perform a script that you do not love."[50)]

Another benefit of BPC that requires further reflection is how it elevates the relevance of cultural epistemology by raising the profile of the body (or bodies) of modern performers and thus making the performer's social location more explicit. For example, a performance from the book of Ruth would be very different if performed by a man or woman. Or, to be more specific, in my context in the U.S., between a white man and a woman of color. Or, perhaps even more compelling would be an ensemble performance in which Bo'az was played by a white male, who occupies an equivalent place of privilege in the modern context, and Ruth was played by a female immigrant, or a refugee, or some other marginalized person. Or, like the Broadway musical Hamilton does, reversing those roles and casting Boaz as a person of color.[51)] It would be different yet if the entire cast were women.[52)] These casting decisions could lend an authenticity and depth — as well as social and political texture — to a performance, which could resonate deeply with the story in its original context.

7. Conclusion

Biblical performance criticism is an emerging discipline with enormous potential to beneficially impact the way scholars interpret the Bible in their

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49) C. S. Lewis once wrote, that the scriptures "demand a response from the whole [person], should make it so clear that there is no question of learning a subject but of *steeping ourselves in a Personality*, acquiring a new outlook and temper, breathing a new atmosphere, suffering Him, in His own way, to rebuild in us the defaced image of Himself." C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1958), 114.

50) Jeff said this to one of my classes as we were discussing the process and benefits of performing the Bible.

51) Cf. S. Kornhaber, "Hamilton: Casting After Colorblindness", *The Atlantic* (March 31, 2016), accessed 22 June 2020 from https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/hamilton-casting/476247/.

52) For more on this — and a case for the genesis of the Book of Ruth being in an all-female guild of storytellers in antiquity — see the fascinating recent study by W. Doan and T. Giles, *The Story of Naomi—The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016).

writings, professors teach it in their classes, pastors preach it to (and with!) their congregations, and lay people engage it at home or in small groups. Attending more carefully to the dramatic character of the biblical narratives and the oral performance context out of which they arose suggests they are more akin to dramas — scripts of ancient plays — than exclusively literary documents. Further, elevating the significance of the body as central to the interpretive process changes the interpreter's relationship with the script and opens new doorways of possibility for interpretation. Sensitivity to the complex process whereby the tension is built and released (dramatic structure) attunes the interpreter to important details in the script that might otherwise be passed over, such as the location of God with respect to the rock and Moses' staff (and its theological implications), a detail about which God is explicit in the instructions to Moses, which are tantamount to stage directions. Finally, getting out of one's chair and entering the drama is the first step — both literally and figuratively — to experiencing the "living and active" character of the biblical dramas. If we are willing to move beyond the metaphor of the Bible as a book to inhabit a new (though ancient!) way of relating to the biblical dramas through performance, we open ourselves to encounter the stories anew and may even discover that we are changed in the process.

<Keywords>
Biblical Performance Criticism, Old Testament Narratives, Hebrew Bible, Embodied Exegesis, Drama and the Bible.

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<Abstract>

The Art of Biblical Performance:
Biblical Performance Criticism and the Old Testament Narratives

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For centuries, the Bible's essential identity as a book has been taken for granted as a self-evident truth by scholars and lay people alike. But should it be? *Is* the Bible a book? Well, it is, and it is not — it is much more than a book. For significant portions of its history, the narrative contents of the Bible were not primarily encountered in written form, but rather through embodied recitation by a performer or a group of performers, who incarnated the story before a live audience. Biblical performance criticism (BPC) is an emerging, interdisciplinary approach to interpreting the Bible that takes seriously both the Bible's oral history and its vitality as the Word of God. It provides a process whereby scholars, pastors, and lay people alike can come to deepen their understanding of a biblical text through embodied performance.

In this article, I argue that the cultural realities of ancient Israel combined with a reassessment of the biblical narratives from the perspective of BPC suggest that the art practiced by the biblical composers was not of an essentially literary character, but rather of a *dramatic* character, which came to expression in performance. The narrative texts contained in the Hebrew Bible are more akin to dramatic scripts than a purely literary form of writing. The ancient crafts of drama and *performance* are evident in the texts we receive. Embodied reenactments of the biblical dramas — through body and voice in space and time before a gathered audience — demonstrates the "living and active" character of the word(s) of God (Heb 4:12). The art of biblical performance is to show, rather than tell.

Thus, I will argue that a fuller understanding of Israel's performance tradition will lead to a greater appreciation of Israel's dramatic and theological achievement. I will demonstrate this by applying BPC to the brief story of Moses striking the rock in the wilderness, found in Exodus 17:1–7. Embodied engagement with this drama through performance clarifies the conflict that

drives the story; attends to the critical role played by dialogue, gestures, spacing, and tone of voice in shaping the theological affirmation of the story. Further, I will demonstrate how the bodies of actors responding to the stage directions embedded in the "script" reveal a surprising act of love on the part of God, which stands at the heart of the drama's climax and resonates with the heart of Christian theology — a climax that will be missed if it is not *seen*.