

Article

Performing Ecclesiastes: Text as Script

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Abstract: All biblical scholars are committed to the interpretation of ancient written texts, but Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) reminds interpreters that performance helps us better understand Scripture. A distinct difference between Narrative Criticism and Performance Criticism is the broader application of Performance Criticism to poetic and prose texts that are not grounded in narrative. The ambiguity of prose and poetry that does not readily identify speakers is open to a range of performative interpretations. Furthermore, audiences are necessary for performance and contribute to meaning-making. The embodied experience of performers and audience alike contribute to the interpretation of biblical texts. This article reflects on a performance of Ecclesiastes translated as a script of a television talk show, claiming that embodying and performing Scripture is itself a method for interpretation. Through the performance of Scripture, we are reminded that interpretation is shared and dynamic within the community of faith.

Keywords: Biblical Performance Criticism; performance; Ecclesiastes; Qohelet; embodiment; translation; interpretation; audience

1. Introduction

As a teacher and scholar of the Hebrew Bible, I take great satisfaction in assisting others in exploring the biblical literature and seeing lives transformed by renewed appreciation for those texts. I have become convinced that performance helps us to better understand Scripture. I share the conviction that biblical traditions in their earliest transmission were orally communicated through a variety of formats.¹ The renewed emphasis on orality and performance through the discipline of Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC), I would argue, is one way to bring the Bible back to life for contemporary audiences.

In this volume of essays, we are investigating the similarities and differences between Narrative Criticism and Performance Criticism, and for me a critical difference is the effectiveness of BPC as a method for use with both narrative and non-narrative genres. Poetry and epistles have as much potential for performance as gospels and novellas.² While there is much overlap between the methods of Narrative Criticism and Performance Criticism, the latter by its very definition emphasizes the importance of audience, since performance implies a gathered audience, whereas narrative's 'implied reader' is most readily thought of in the singular. As David Rhoads notes:

We know from ancient sources that audiences contributed to performances. A silent reader is mainly receptive. The silent reader negotiates meaning but does not change the words on a page. The responses of an actual audience can affect the words of a performer or the way lines are delivered. A performer might have shortened or lengthened what was performed depending on the interest of the audience. *We cannot speak about performances, therefore, without talking about involvement of audiences.* (Rhoads 2018, p. 170. Emphasis added)

An inherent focus on the audience takes us back to that goal of assisting others to be impacted by the Bible. I am utilizing a method of BPC that begins with a translation of the text in order to draw out its intrinsic performative features, followed by a performance of that text in the form of a script that aims to gain new insights about the text from its



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performance. The script is faithful to the underlying text, albeit presented creatively as a script for a group of contemporary actors. With this method, the experience of the actors and the responses of the audience contribute to a new interpretation of the text.

In this essay, I will offer four distinct advantages of Biblical Performance Criticism, illustrating my points with reflections on a performance of Ecclesiastes in which my translation of the Hebrew text took the format of a television talk show. I will propose that performing Scripture offers insights into the experience of the earliest biblical communities; that performing Scripture prioritizes embodiment; that performing Scripture is itself a method for interpretation; and that by performing Scripture, we are reminded that interpretation is shared and dynamic within the community of faith.

2. The Script of Ecclesiastes

Performative-sensitive translations of biblical books can emphasize and celebrate the drama intrinsic to the original composition, offering clues to the aural experience of the original audiences. I translated Ecclesiastes and casted it as a script for performance by several actors. In the discussion that follows, I will describe the reactions of the actors and audience as they experienced this biblical book in this unique format as a performed dialogical script. A few introductory comments about the book will assist in framing the context.

Ecclesiastes is a fascinating book. It shares with other wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible a commitment to observation as the primary source of inspiration. To be ‘wise’ is to reflect on patterns in human action and the natural world and to generalize about the human condition and the world around on the basis of these observations and life experiences (see [Fyfe 2019](#)). The conventional wisdom traditions, especially the book of Proverbs, accept wisdom as God’s gift (Prov 2:6), and emphasize the importance of teaching and learning from others (Prov 13:20, 12:15, 19:20, 21:11; Job 8:8). By contrast, the writer of Ecclesiastes seems to be sceptical about conclusions drawn by others. He *does* adopt the method of observation, using the verb *r’h* (‘to see’) eighteen times in the scroll, but rejects the conclusion that this leads to wisdom:

And I have seen all of the works of the God, that the human being is not able to find the work that is done under the sun, which though the human being toils to seek it, he will not find it. And although he says he wants to know it—the wise man—he is not able to find it. (8:16–17)³

As well as exploring the theme of wisdom, the book of Ecclesiastes discusses creation, society, wealth, pleasure, work, justice, righteousness, wickedness, relationships, vows, youth, age, and death, concluding that all these things are *hebel*. This Hebrew word, traditionally translated as ‘vanity’ but in my translation as ‘dross’, is a key word in the book. Its broad semantic scope includes futility, absurdity, insubstantiality, ephemerality, elusiveness, and the waste vapour of expelled breath. The word ‘dross’ was chosen both in order to convey the meaning of worthlessness and due to the lingering sibilant sound at the end of the word that contributes to its ephemeral connotation.

There are many references to God in Ecclesiastes. Yet God (always Elohim, never YHWH) is distant, unable to be fathomed. Unusually, the definite article is nearly always used with Elohim. The God is creator and provider but allows good gifts to be taken away (6:2). The God gives work and toil for humankind to busy themselves with, but that toil is ultimately pointless, like chasing the wind (1:13–14). The God judges, but the same fate of death comes to all whether they lived righteously or not (9:2). No prayers, complaints, or laments are addressed to this God. Yet, surprisingly, a theme of joy in life is also found in this book. Four times we hear there is nothing better than to accept the gift of The God to ‘relish, and drink, and enjoy toil’ (2:24; 3:12; 3:22; 8:15).

The author of Ecclesiastes is traditionally identified with Solomon on the basis of the opening verse (‘The words of Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem’), but the consensus of critical scholarship is that Solomon could not have been the author ([Fox 2004](#), p. x). The most prominent view is that a narrator frames the book (1:1–11, 12:9–14) and the body

of the book represents the words of a single figure, although there have been attempts to characterize the book as a dialogue between a representative of wisdom and antiwisdom, or between a teacher and student (Krüger 2004, p. 17). David Penchansky refers to three ‘voices’ in Ecclesiastes, but still claims to want to make one of these voices the ‘authentic’ voice (Penchansky 2012, p. 50). The jumble of themes and frequent contradictions are variously explained as representing different views of the author in the different eras of his life; evidence of redaction; incorporation of portions of texts from other hands; or intentional poles of meaning (Krüger 2004, pp. 14–19).

Knut Heim’s recent commentary on Ecclesiastes (Heim 2019) is written from the perspective of BPC. He argues the text of Ecclesiastes is the written record of a speech composed to be performed before live audiences in the third century BCE, in the context of socio-political, economic, and religious challenges presented for the inhabitants of Judea living under foreign rule by the Egyptian-based Ptolemaic dynasty of the Greek Empire. Heim views the book of Ecclesiastes as a satire (‘resistance literature’) in which the foreign regime is critiqued in the style of stand-up comedians.⁴ Humour and ambiguity are deliberate ploys utilized to disguise the critique that could otherwise lead to reprisals—for Heim, this explains the contradictions and other unusual features of the book.

Heim assumes a historical performance as the background for Ecclesiastes. Along with other proponents of BPC, Heim is committed to understanding the biblical worlds as oral–aural cultures in which, perhaps, only fifteen percent of the population were literate and, even less in rural settings (Rhoads 2023, p. xi). The original transmission of these traditions was, therefore, most likely ‘performed’ in the sense of being conveyed orally by embodied communicators to audiences in shared spaces. Many texts still bear the oral imprint that attest to this early transmission tradition.

As I translated the book of Ecclesiastes, I was also looking out for performative features within it. For me, the contradictions and differing perspectives made the best sense as three different voices.⁵

The predominant perspective is that of a jaded seeker of wisdom who views all things as ‘dross’. This voice is characterized by the repeated catchphrases ‘all is dross’ and ‘herding wind’—any idea that is explored ultimately circles back to these assertions. Frequent pairing of the phrase with the word ‘evil’ ensures that the connotation is more negative than positive (1:13–14; 2:17, 21; 4:3–4, 8; 6:2; 8:10). These phrases are combined with the observation that there is ultimately no difference between a wise man and a fool, or between a human being and a beast, since all share the same fate of death. The outlook for this voice is predominantly pessimistic. Another characteristic of this voice is the use of first-person pronouns—an unusual feature in Hebrew prose. All but five of the twenty-eight first-person pronouns that occur in the script are spoken by this voice.

Alongside this voice is another that commends enjoyment of life and describes good things as a gift from The God (2:24; 3:10–11a, 13; 5:18 [MT 5:17]; 8:15; 9:7). Some phrases attributed to this optimistic voice share vocabulary with other voices, but are coupled with a positive outlook. For example, the first voice observes ‘evil’ under the sun (4:1, 3; 5:13 [MT 5:12]; 6:1; 10:5), while the optimistic voice views life under the sun as a blessing (5:18 [MT 5:17]; 8:15; 9:9). The first voice asks what advantage can be found in toil (3:9), and the second claims the task that God gave is ‘beautiful in its time’ (3:10–11a). This voice is also inclined to aphorisms and pithy sayings that can sound shallow when out of the right context (4:6, 9–12; 6:9a; 7:1a, 9–12; 9:4; 11:1–3).

The optimistic voice includes references to The God, but a third voice that also frequently refers to The God characteristically uses language of judgment rather than gift, with frequent use of the word *yr*, a word that has connotations of both fear and worship. This voice exhorts others to be ‘God-fearers’ (7:18; 8:12). References to judgment by The God nonetheless affirm the judgment as just (3:17; 7:18; 8:6,12; 11:9; 12:14), which contrasts with the first voice that has no confidence in the reward of the righteous and punishment of those who do evil (3:16; 7:15; 8:14). A predominance of imperative verbs used by this third voice contrasts with the first voice, which is less willing to demand agreement from others.

In distinguishing these three different perspectives, I concluded the book was best viewed as a conversation. Even if we were to assume a single orator as the *persona* of Qohelet, he is having a dialogue with himself, evidenced by the circling around similar themes and the presentation of contradictory views on the same topic. The concept of multiple voices in conversation over the meaning of life is one that has great potential for performance. The idea of Qohelet as a literary persona can readily be expanded to conceptualize several literary personae sharing the same stage. The framing ‘narrator’ voice could be incorporated into this vision as a moderator of the conversation.

My translation and performance reading of Ecclesiastes, *Reading the Megillot* (Mathews 2023), is a contribution to the ‘Reading the Old Testament’ series of Smyth and Helwys. Authors in this series are invited to introduce ‘cutting edge research in a form accessible to a wide audience.’ Through the lens of BPC, I translated each of the five books in the Megillot and creatively imagined each work as a different type of performance, based on the content and style of the material. Ecclesiastes, with its discernible multiple voices, was scripted in the format of a television talk show with the title *Words* (*dibrēy*, the first word of the Hebrew text). The script became a conversation between three different personae, moderated by a host. Such shows that we know from contemporary popular culture range in content from light to serious and are often broken up by musical items (and advertisements if on commercial television channels). After breaks, the dialogue resumes, often with some repetition of ideas. The conversation is free-flowing, and a good host maintains interest by astutely drawing out the views of guests and guiding the discussion, reiterating their points, and keeping material up his sleeve if needed to give the audience variety. Importantly, guests with different views are tolerated and value judgments are rarely made by the host of the show.

The lack of punctuation in the underlying Hebrew text allows for the freedom to imagine the flow of the conversation, giving permission to break the dialogue into questions and responses. When read as a dialogue, there are no obvious clues to identify the different speakers outside of the content of their speech. This forms a contrast to narrative texts where the narrator introduces speakers by name or with the narrative formula ‘then s/he said’. In the script I created, the text was divided between a Host, the keynote speaker Qohelet, and two other panellists: the Optimist and the Pietist. While translating the text, I found three sections that did not readily fit one of these three perspectives. Moreover, the three sections are especially poetic, identified by parallelism and a heightened use of metaphor, prompting Robert Alter’s description of the genre of Ecclesiastes as ‘evocative rhythmic prose that occasionally scans as poetry’ (Alter 2019, p. 673). Drawing on the talk show format, these sections became performances within the performance of Ecclesiastes in my script, envisaged as two musical items (3:1–8; 9:11) and a formal poetry-reading by the persona of Qohelet (12:2–7). The themes of each of these poems are discussed elsewhere in the scroll but have an independent style that invite this ‘guest appearance’ portrayal. The Masoretic notations that dictate the recitation of Hebrew texts suggest pauses at these points in the script, further justifying the shift to a new mode of presentation within the structure of the talk show.

It seemed opportune to use the occasion of a book launch of *Reading the Megillot* (Mathews 2023) for a performance of the script of Ecclesiastes, chosen from the five Megillot scrolls because its format was simple to stage.⁶ The cast was made up of members of my family and friends, none of whom were professional or even experienced actors, and, although we had several rehearsals, they did not learn the lines but read from the script. Qohelet, the Host, and the Pietist were played by men and the Optimist was played by a woman. The musical items were performed by a mother and daughter who composed original music to accompany the words. The performance was a little less than an hour in length. It was recorded and is available to view on YouTube.⁷ Experiencing and reflecting upon this performance has highlighted aspects of BPC that I wish to focus on in the remainder of this essay.

3. Four Advantages of Biblical Performance Criticism

3.1. *Performing Scripture Offers Insights into the Experience of the Earliest Biblical Communities*

I have already asserted that the earliest biblical communities operated in an oral-media culture in which oral transmission of traditions was normative. Current debates amongst biblical scholars suggest that it is more accurate to speak of an oral-scribal culture in which there was an interplay between oral performance and written composition.⁸ Undoubtedly, the same material was performed on numerous occasions with different audiences, at some point written down, and then used as the basis for further performances, perhaps being modified over time as audiences responded in different ways. In discussing this process, David Rhoads speaks of a ‘paradigm shift from narrative in print to narrative in performance’ (Rhoads 2018, p. 160) as a way of highlighting the fluidity of composition. A ‘print medium mentality’ (Rhoads 2018, p. 157) assumes that a single author composed a fixed manuscript for readers, whereas it would be more accurate to reconceive biblical writings as witnesses to multiple oral performances. Small variations in ancient witnesses suggest that it was not until well after the biblical period that written compositions became fixed. Experiencing Scripture in oral performance, therefore, gives contemporary audiences a better sense of how they were originally heard—in gathered communities at the same place and the same time.

Another feature that distinguishes BPC from Narrative Criticism is the scope of the biblical material in focus for analysis. Whereas Narrative Criticism generally hones in on pericopes or units, training its adherents to recognize ‘beginnings and endings’ (Amit 2001, pp. 33–45, 58–61), BPC regularly engages with complete biblical books. Hearing an entire work in one performance is an unusual experience for many contemporary readers of the Bible, but it was the normal way in which Scripture was heard in the ancient world. Contemporary audiences for the Megillot in Jewish communities should be acknowledged as an exception to this, since the five books of the Megillot are read in their entirety at their relevant festivals. It would be true to say, however, that for many in the audience of *Words*, it was the first time they had encountered the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole. The repetition of words and ideas in the script (discussed in detail below) became more obvious and the flow of the dialogue, circling round similar themes, was experienced as typical of the nature of conversation within the talk show format. When I was translating the book, I was intrigued by the link between the content of the book and its literary structure. Repetitions and contradictions and a lack of logical flow of thought appeared to mirror the message of the book, expressed consistently in the voice of Qohelet, that nothing is solid or able to be pinned down. Seeing and hearing the book in performance, however, allowed that jumble of ideas to be perceived as a more natural conversational phenomenon. The division of the script among characters ensured that where contradictions began to be perceived as points of tension, the conversation was steered in another direction by the Host or one of the three guests. The musical items and recited poem were a welcome break from the discussion, but the themes of time (the songs) and decay (the poem) were reminiscent of the matters discussed by the panel of guests at other points in the talk show.

Feedback received from a member of the audience was that it was easier to hear the words spoken from a script than to read them on the page. This person admitted to never reading the book in its entirety before, assuming it was ‘repetitive and a little boring’, but the experience of hearing the script engendered for them a renewed interest in reading Ecclesiastes. The earliest audiences of this material would likewise have encountered the ideas spoken aloud and in the context of a gathered community, in which repetition, interjections, and perhaps even questions for clarification would have contributed to imprinting ideas and engendering interest in pursuing those ideas in later conversations.

My script of Ecclesiastes was based on my highly literal translation of the Hebrew text. Schleiermacher characterized the problem of translation in this way: ‘Either the translator leaves the writer as far as possible in peace, and moves the reader towards him; or else he leaves the reader as far as possible in peace, and moves the writer towards him’ (quoted in Barton 2022, p. 18). My translations do not ‘leave the reader in peace’ because

I want to hear more closely what original audiences would have heard. For example, I characteristically follow Hebrew sentence structure where verbs precede subjects. This results in a script that does not sound quite natural to English speakers. Like modern versions of Shakespeare plays that retain Shakespeare's sixteenth-century English, however, audiences adapt after a short time and are able to understand the awkward-sounding script. Each of my cast commented on the difference between reading the script silently to themselves and speaking it aloud, where pacing, emphasis, and gesture aided in conveying the meaning, an observation that was confirmed by audience members. Furthermore, by placing the script in a familiar genre, a television talk show format, a secure scaffold was provided for an audience to do the work of moving towards an unfamiliar text without too much discomfort.⁹

Wordplay is a feature of biblical Hebrew that is often lost in translation. The key word of this script, *hebel*, is echoed in similar-sounding words in other parts of the book, and I tried to carry this through in my translation so that contemporary audiences would hear the same echoes as ancient audiences. Thus, translating *hebel* as 'dross,' I translated *ʔēbahēl* as 'drivel' (5:2 [MT 5:1]), *hibbēl* as 'dismiss' (5:6 [MT 5:5]), and *ʔēbel* as 'drooping'. The Optimist had a line that in Hebrew is obviously wordplay: *tōv šēm mišmem tōv* (7:1a). I decided to retain the Hebrew phrase so that audiences could hear the wordplay in the original, but the Optimist helpfully also spoke the phrase in English ('A good name is better than good oil'). One of Qohelet's lines—another phrase with obvious wordplay with its repeated K, S, and L consonants and the *ê* vowel—is translated to illustrate the wordplay with the line 'like the crackle of the nettle under the kettle' (7:6a). This line was effectively performed by the actor playing Qohelet in a high-pitched 'witchy' voice, to which the rest of the panel responded by laughing in delight, only to be pulled up short by Qohelet's next line 'This is the laughter of the fool—also this is dross' (7:6b). My translation was influenced by that of Michael Fox: 'For the levity of the fool is like the crackling of nettles under a kettle' (Fox 2004, p. 45). By translating the Hebrew word order more literally, however, the 'laughter of the fool' came after the aphorism, heightening the effect.

Rhyme is not a common feature in Hebrew prose or poetry, so when it is there I have tried to replicate it in the assumption that an ancient audience would have been aware of its aural effect also. In the first musical item, several pairs include rhymes in the Hebrew text, mirrored in my translation where 'a time to weep and a time to laugh' (3:4a, NRSV) became 'a time for weeping and a time for leaping' and the pairs 'seek/lose, keep/throw away' (3:6, NRSV) became 'a time for seeking and a time for ceasing; a time for keeping and a time for releasing'. The script signals an end to the show with the rhyming phrase 'End of Words. All has been heard'—a translation of the Hebrew in which the final syllable of each word is stressed: *sōf dāvār/hakol nišmāʿ*. With this 'wrapping up' of the conversation, the words that follow from the lips of the Pietist come across as a desperate attempt to have the last word. The performance of these words in this way supports a common assumption that the book has a 'concluding editorial' (Bandstra 1995, p. 459), and I will return to a further discussion of this interpretation below.

3.2. Performing Scripture Prioritizes Embodiment for Both Performers and Audiences

When Scripture becomes a script to be *performed*, audiences will be cued by more than just words on a page. Embodied actors are the focus of attention, where pace and timing, the sounds of words, repeated and exaggerated themes, gestures, and interactions with other actors and with the audience will all contribute to an audience's perception and understanding of the biblical tradition.

For the audience, Scripture literally becomes alive in the bodies of the performers: in their words, movements, expressions, and other non-linguistic signals. For the actor, reading Scripture is not an abstract, intellectual exercise, but instead becomes a series of decisions about how to convey the words of the script, often internalized, via breath and voice, posture and movement (Perry 2016, p. 39). Audience and actors alike become involved with Scripture in a finite time and space. As Peter Perry expresses it, 'Performance

criticism helps readers of the Bible reconnect the body (including emotions) with the mind in experiencing the text' (Perry 2016, p. 147).

Here, I think, is another essential difference between BPC and Narrative Criticism. A key feature of narrative is the omniscient narrator, disembodied from the story but guiding the reader by determining which information is conveyed and which is held back. Naturally, these decisions are the author's, but they are conveyed through the narrator's voice, the one telling the story. A written script provides the material that is to be conveyed, but rarely the stage instructions that guide *how* it is to be conveyed. When a performance of a narrative portion of Scripture includes a narrator within the cast, that embodied narrator will lose their objectivity and will be subject to the same decisions about *how* to narrate the tale, as are the other actors in *how* to perform their part. Meaning is conveyed not only through words, but also through other aspects of face-to-face communication, including non-linguistic sounds, intonation, pacing, volume, gestures, facial expressions, direction of gaze, and so forth.

In our performance of *Words*, the four performers were seated beside each other in a curved arrangement of comfortable chairs. In this way, they could be seen by each other but also by the audience, and they could direct their comments either to each other or to the audience. The *how* choices that were made were a combination of direction from myself as the one who had decided the divisions within the 'script' and the discretion of the actors who were bringing the words to life. Several times in the script where imperative verbs occur, these verses were interpreted as direct address to the audience. For example, the Optimist's appeal 'Rejoice, young man, in your laddishness, and let your heart be good to you in the days of your youth, and walk in the ways of your heart and in the desires of your eyes' (11:9a) was followed by the Pietist also addressing the audience: 'And know that over all these things The God will bring you into judgement!' (11:9b).

Much of the interaction between the panel was conveyed non-verbally, including agitated movement to indicate a wish to offer a different viewpoint, frequent 'mmm' vocalizations by Qohelet that forged links between comments, or slight gestures with the head or hands towards another character to emphasize a point. The Pietist was seated between Qohelet and the Optimist and characteristically held his hands in a prayer pose, enabling him to use subtle hand gestures. This was particularly effective when he gestured first towards Qohelet and then towards the Optimist while speaking the line 'A heart of wisdom is in a house of drooping, but a heart of foolishness is in a house of joy' (7:4). Kelly Iverson examines the ability of non-verbal communication to affect audience experience and, thus, the interpretive process. This is another area where BPC and Narrative Criticism diverge. As Iverson notes: '... unlike the writer, the performer possesses a variety of tools to enhance and clarify the communication exchange, including facial expressions, gestures, body language, voice intonation, movement, and so on' (Iverson 2021, p. 94). And I would add that the use of silence, a powerful tool in storytelling, is extremely effective in performance but can only be implied or inferred in narrative.

The embodiment of texts has the potential to draw out humour, as in the example just given of the Pietist's gestures. Humour is an inherent aspect of many biblical texts that is often unnoticed due to the expectation that the Bible is a serious document (Perry 2023a, p. 2). Qohelet's speech that describes his quest for pleasure is an exaggerated litany of excessive uses of wealth in which humans are listed along with buildings, gardens, and animals as possessions sought for pleasure: 'slave and maidservants, sons of the house ... tenors, sopranos ... even concubines' (2:7–8). The Host, listening to this, reacted with appropriate facial expressions, including a look of titillation at the mention of 'concubines' that encouraged the audience to respond with laughter. Another humorous part of the script is a series of proverb-like sayings commencing with the statement 'A dead fly makes odious the flowing oil of the perfumer' (10:1). This comment in the mouth of the Pietist was spoken with an appropriate unctuousness, but was followed by a quick exchange of short statements predominantly between the Pietist, Optimist, and Host. This banter,

which played out as eager ‘one-upmanship’, was concluded with Qohelet’s deflating ‘fools make many words’ (10:14)—drawing appreciative laughter from the audience.

Repetition is a characteristic of biblical literature, significant in all forms of poetry and prose, including narrative. While conceding that repetition may reflect underlying oral traditions, Robert Alter nonetheless writes eloquently about the use of repetition as part of the narrative art of the Bible (Alter 1981, pp. 88–113). I find it unfortunate that translations can mask such repetition by not employing lexical consistency, so in my translations I take care to use the same English translation for the same Hebrew words and roots in order to ensure such repetition is clearly evident. Repetition is especially obvious in carefully translated biblical traditions that are embodied and performed, because audiences hear the same words over and over within a short space of time. Performers can emphasize this by stressing the words or adding characteristic expression as they are used. In Ecclesiastes, there are a number of catch phrases, the most obvious being ‘Dross of dross.’ In the script of *Words*, the word ‘dross’ is used in twenty-nine of Qohelet’s lines. It was not long before the audience was reacting to the word each time it was repeated, and by the end of the performance several members of the audience spontaneously joined in Qohelet’s final line ‘Dross of dross, *all is dross*.’ The Optimist also spoke this word in two of her lines. In the longer speech, addressed to the audience, she acknowledged that while life is dross, it can still hold enjoyment:

Go, relish with enjoyment your bread, and drink with a good heart your wine. For he has already accepted your works—the God that is! At all times let your clothes be white and put oil on your head—let there be no lack. See through life with a woman you love, all the days of your life of *dross*, which were given to you under the sun, all your days of *dross*, for this is your portion in life and in your toil which you are toiling under the sun (9:7–9)

Each mention of the word dross was spoken slowly and accompanied by a nod towards Qohelet, acknowledging that he had introduced the word but that it was possible to use this concept with a more positive nuance.

Concomitantly, the phrase ‘relish, and drink, and enjoy toil’ was the Optimist’s distinctive slogan. The translation of ‘relish’ for the Hebrew root *’kl* was a word that stood out due to its repetition in a number of lines outside of the Optimist’s catchphrase. In a reverse exchange, it became a source of sarcasm for Qohelet, who could repeat the idea but stress its futility, especially in this speech:

There *is* an evil which I have seen under the sun, and much of it over the human being: a man to whom the God gives wealth and possessions and glory and nothing lacking for his body and for all which he desires for himself, but the God will not empower him to *relish* it, instead, a different man will *relish* it. This is dross and an evil illness! (6:1–2)

The Optimist reacted with frustrated sighs that embodied and emphasized the different attitudes that are integral to the book of Ecclesiastes. On the one hand, life is a gift to be enjoyed. On the other, humans cannot trust The God to be other than arbitrary in the distribution of this gift.

A seven-fold repetition of the word ‘found’ (*mts*) within a few verses in Ecclesiastes 7 explores the question of whether wisdom can be found. In my script, the same word is spoken by the Host, Qohelet, and the Pietist, with the Host initiating the series by posing the question ‘who can find it?’ (7:24c). In the exchange, Qohelet claims ‘I found, I myself, more bitter than death is the woman, she who snares and her heart traps and her hands fetter’ (7:26a), to which the Pietist responds ‘Good is the one before The God, he will escape from her but the sinner will be captured by her’ (7:26b). The theme is continued by Qohelet, who claims ‘One human being in a thousand I have found, but a woman in all these I have not found’ (7:28c). These verses engender much debate in commentaries as to whether the author of the book was inherently sexist or whether the verses are referencing Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly—a common trope in the book of Proverbs (see Wolfe 2020, pp.

108–9 for a summary of the debate). The fact that our cast included a woman added an unexpected but fascinating dimension to the performance of these words, noticed in the first rehearsal, because it lifted them from theoretical philosophizing to embodied reality. The three male actors were joined together in the exchange with the female actor excluded from it and, via their glances and gestures, objectified by it. Our female Optimist rolled her eyes a few times during this exchange but, in the way the script was fortuitously divided, *she* was given the last line: ‘Except, see, *I* found *this*. That The God made the human being upright’ (7:29a).

Biblical Performance Criticism, therefore, embraces and prioritizes the embodied experience as integral to interpretation. This contrasts with Narrative Criticism and is, in fact, a departure from all traditional interpretive methods. As Sarah Agnew has commented,

Most often . . . the physical, emotional and relational experience of a theologian is relegated to the background, with a cursory acknowledgment of ‘bias’ before a supposedly disembodied, rational and objective discussion. (Agnew 2020, p. 17)

By contrast, BPC advocates embodied, emotive, audience engagement with biblical traditions¹⁰ as integral to the process of interpretation, to which I now turn.

3.3. *Performing Scripture Becomes a Method for Interpretation*

As I will argue in this section, BPC will never claim that one performance or one audience can determine the interpretation of the Bible. Rather, ‘performance as rehearsal’ or ‘performance as experiment’ better describes the method of BPC. A performer takes a script and tries out different possibilities of delivering that text to convey meaning. Some work better than others. Audience responses to performed texts influence the next performance. These experimental performances themselves become ways to explore and compare interpretations of texts, and, as Peter Perry claims, ‘performance opens some interpretations and closes others’ (Perry 2016, p. 146). This sentiment is expressed more fully by David Rhoads:

Performance both limits and expands interpretation. On the one hand, performance limits interpretations because, in a performance, the performer has to make interpretive choices about how to deliver every line and act out every scene. By presenting one way of understanding the story, these choices exclude other interpretive choices. . . . On the other hand, multiple performances expand interpretations because the narrative can be performed in many different ways. Mainly, however, performance expands and amplifies interpretation because it is in a different medium. (Rhoads 2018, p. 167)

In other words, new insights about the biblical tradition emerge as practitioners enter into performance and engage with audiences. Let me give three examples of this method at work.

My introduction to the world of BPC was my doctoral work in the book of Habakkuk. I translated the book with an eye on aspects of performance embedded in the text, then wrote and analysed it as a script (see Mathews 2012a, 2012b). In an early attempt to ‘perform’ the script with a local church group, I assigned several voices (the prophet, YHWH, the Chaldean king) and asked the remaining participants to serve as a chorus to read the third chapter, the theophanic psalm. In that ‘experiment’, I discovered that the ‘chorus’ became the dominant voice of the performance, simply due to the increased volume of many voices chanting together. The transmission of the book in that manner seemed unbalanced. Performance critic Peter Perry took my script and performed it himself before several church audiences. This experience became part of his research and preparation for writing *Insights from Performance Criticism* (Perry 2016). He retained the hymn-like communal participation of the third chapter by teaching a two-line refrain from the beginning of Habakkuk 3 to his audience and inviting them to chant the refrain at key points in the script. The result, more effective than my own attempt, was that the audience was included in the performance (as warranted by the script) without being permitted to dominate.

A second example of rehearsal as interpretation also comes from Perry's rehearsals of the script of Habakkuk. As he internalized the script, Perry came to a different understanding of how the script is divided in the first chapter of the book, where there is a dialogue between Habakkuk and YHWH. Most often, the verses are understood to be the prophet speaking in verses 2–4, YHWH in verses 5–11, and the prophet again in verses 12–17. This was how I had divided the speakers in my script also. Whilst rehearsing the chapter, Perry became convinced that the identity of the speakers should be re-assigned, so that other than verses 1 and 5a, the entire chapter should be understood as speech of the prophet. He explains:

God's speech is usually taken to continue until [verse 11]. . . The problem is that God's introduction is positive. God calls the audience and the nations to attention. God invites them to be astounded, which sounds like they will be impressed with the solution. God announces that this is a 'work being worked in your days,' as if it is a satisfactory response to Habakkuk's complaint. . . After building up the audience's expectation of a positive solution to injustice in Judah, I had trouble announcing the Chaldeans as 'hurtful and hasty' (1:6b). . . Instead of a statement, I made 1:6b into a rhetorical question the prophet speaks in shock to God's revelation that God had raised up the Chaldeans. (Perry 2016, pp. 96–97)

Peter's rehearsal and engagement with my translated script has had an impact on my own view of Habakkuk, and I would now agree that it is the prophet who speaks those words.

My last example is from the Ecclesiastes talk show. The participant with the most natural acting ability was the friend who played the Pietist. In the view of the rest of the cast, his performance, along with the musical items, were the highlights of the evening. Wearing a long white surplice retained from earlier involvement in an Anglican Church where he served on occasion as an acolyte, his mannerisms and gestures were appropriately pious and his subtle expressions were entertaining. Following the performance, a member of the audience (himself an Anglican clergyman) initiated a conversation with me about this friend's performance of the Pietist, questioning whether it had become too much of a caricature of the type one expects to see in a contemporary post-Christendom world where faith and the church are frequently ridiculed. I welcomed the exchange and agreed his question was important. If my script of Ecclesiastes intended to convey three equally valid perspectives on the themes of the book, a caricatured performance of one of those perspectives could result in an unbalanced portrayal. This exchange, in fact, illustrates a key advantage of performing Scripture: by engaging with the performance, even in disagreement with the portrayal, audience members can participate in the interpretation of Scripture themselves! In the performance of texts, for both actor and audience, new interpretation results. The issue is not 'which performance is the correct performance', but 'what is worth trying that will elicit reactions and a better understanding of the Scripture?'

One of my first experiences of BPC as a method of interpretation was a session at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in which Tom Boomersshine performed Mark's Passion Narrative and then engaged with a panel of respondents. Whilst the performance was memorable, so also was the panel discussion in which Boomersshine was challenged about his performance choices and the conversation about interpretation and cultural sensitivities that ensued. The value of the occasion was not on the performance per se, but on the new light shed on the interpretation of Mark's Passion Narrative that resulted from the performance and subsequent conversation between the performer and audience.

Performance allows for, indeed demands, a range of interpretive choices, each of which can be argued as consistent with the underlying script. In our performance of *Words*, we chose to portray the final line in a humorous way. There is scholarly discussion about the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes, with many agreeing that the final lines are an editorial addition (Enns 2008, p. 124). A common view is that an editor wished to align the content of the book with a more conventional perspective on wisdom. As Barry Bandstra notes,

The Jewish community struggled with Ecclesiastes. Because of its somewhat troubling observations, they perceived the need to retrieve the book from heresy and give it an orthodox patina. The editorial history of the book [including the concluding editorial] gives evidence of their efforts. (Bandstra 1995, p. 458)

In my translated script, the final lines are ‘The God you must fear, and his commandments you must keep. For this is for every human being. For every deed The God will bring into judgment along with every hidden thing, whether good or evil’ (12:13b–14). Similar thoughts are expressed elsewhere in the book and have been allocated to the Pietist in my script. The choice we made for staging was to have the Host announce the end of the show (‘End of Words. All has been heard’) and then walk off stage with Qohelet and the Optimist accompanied by a reprise of one of the musical items. Rather than leave with the others on the panel, the Pietist was to stand up to face the audience and raise his voice to be heard over the music as he said his final lines. He would then look around and notice the others had left the stage and walk off himself, conveying embarrassment. This staging deliberately reflected the scholarly view that the final words are an editorial comment. They thus undermine the ‘anti-wisdom’ expressed elsewhere in the book by ensuring the last word is that it *does* matter how one behaves because judgement is to be expected. By mildly ridiculing the final line, our performance choice prioritized scepticism (all have the same fate no matter their behaviour) and optimism (even if you will be judged, life is still meant to be enjoyed) over pietism (fear The God and watch out). Even so, in our performance the actor playing Qohelet occasionally appeared bored and disengaged, in contrast to the Pietist, who remained engaged right to the end. This in itself gives insight into the editorial process, in which editors do not remove different perspectives but keep a watch to ensure that the ‘right’ message is ultimately conveyed. In another performance, there would be the opportunity to portray a very different interpretation by staging the final line of the script differently. One could infer that since all earthly existence is ‘dross’, the only lasting reality and source for hope is God and God’s commandments. One could imagine the Pietist speaking these words in a gentle, persuasive tone while the other three participants stayed to listen and indicate assent. Such a performance would leave a very different final impression.

Interpretation is, therefore, an iterative process, aided by experimentation within performance and following performance in response to audience reaction and feedback. More than this, however, the act of performance contributes to scholarship by directly addressing critical questions of the received tradition.

I stated earlier that I am convinced that we can hear different voices in the text of Ecclesiastes. This is a critical question of this book—whose perspective is represented? Unlike narrative, where characters are defined and speech is easily attributed to individuals, the speaker(s) of Ecclesiastes are not easily identified. Performing the book as more than one voice is a way to test the idea that there is more than one speaker, and, arguably, it is effective. I have tried out the script with several different audiences, and each time hear the response that it ‘works’ in that it makes greater sense of the book. Another critical question is the identity of Qohelet. The traditional identification of ‘Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (1:1, 12) as an aged King Solomon is generally dismissed by contemporary scholarship, as discussed above. The name Qohelet is never elsewhere identified with Solomon and there is linguistic evidence in the book of a date of composition much later than the ninth century BCE, when Solomon is recorded as king in Israel. Yet, hearing the words of Qohelet performed, along with several other references to ‘king’ in the script (4:13; 5:9; 8:2,4; 9:14; 10:16–17), suggested that Qohelet was an important and respected character for the ancient Jerusalem community, akin to a past president or noble statesman. Having experienced a performance of Ecclesiastes, I am even more convinced that Qohelet is the literary persona of a radical, intellectual, philosophical representative of the social elite, debating points with other literary personae who represent alternative views. Even if this interpretation of the book is convincing, there is still debate to be had over the way I have divided the speeches between the four personalities. I welcome responses

from the players themselves and the audiences if there are different views on this, for example whether it is appropriate for one character to borrow the catchphrase of another as described above, or if this serves better as a way to identify that line as belonging to the character who characteristically speaks it. Often, I have divided a given verse amongst two or more speakers—do such divisions, especially if they are contrary to verse divisions in the Masoretic Text, defy the received tradition and therefore weaken the thesis of different voices? These and other issues illustrate the need for ongoing interpretation via performance.

3.4. *Performing Scripture Is a Reminder That Interpretation Is Shared and Dynamic*

As already noted, the very term ‘performance’ implies an audience. An early advocate of Performance Criticism, Erving Goffman (1959, pp. 15–16) claimed that all activity is performance, including everyday actions. The concept of self-reflexivity suggests that all performers are aware of the difference between the self and the role; therefore, all performance includes an audience, albeit at times only the self as audience (Mathews 2012a, pp. 27–28). More often, however, BPC emphasizes performance as a communication event in which traditions are re-expressed for a gathered audience. Meaning-making is therefore communal and participatory.

Several studies have shown how audiences are more affected by the emotions raised by performance than by ideas portrayed in the performance (Cousins 2016; Perry 2016). Nonetheless, the audiences are involved in the performance, if only by having their emotions raised! And, at best, I share Perry’s expectation that performance helps readers of Scripture reconnect the body with the mind as they experience the text (Perry 2016, p. 147). A number of audience members of *Words* indicated that, while they did not fully comprehend the conversation, they were planning to rewatch the performance and/or read the book of Ecclesiastes as a result of feeling engaged in a new way by the content of the book via performance. Audience engagement is also elicited as self-recognition when audiences identify with the ideas or attitudes expressed in the performance. Unlike narrative, where the reader remains largely an observer, performance draws the audience in. They are invited to and expected to react to what they are seeing. In BPC, where the content of the performance is Scripture, practitioners are committed to reinforcing and shaping the identity of themselves and their audiences. Performance is not merely entertainment, but an engaging way to encourage encounters with the traditions of Scripture.

Recognizing that performance is an embodied experience, we also recognize that performances, performers, and audiences are dynamic. No performance will be the same as the next, nor will an audience in one setting be the same as the next. Prominent events or social issues will impact the way audiences hear a performance. The aforementioned discussion of the role of women in *Words* was an especially sensitive issue at the time it was performed. In contemporary Australian society, respect for and safety of women has been widely discussed due to continuing revelations of sexual abuse within the Australian Parliament House. During the week of the performance of *Words*, the issue was again front-page news. As a result, embodied attitudes towards the female cast member became more prominent and any hypothetical identification of Woman as personified Wisdom or Folly, as is suggested in some commentaries (for example, Bartholomew 2009, pp. 94, 267), would have been far from the mind of our *Words* audience. Nonetheless, the live question of women in society was responded to in this ancient wisdom tradition by allowing the ‘wisdom’ of a female speaker responding with dignity to the debate about women with the line ‘The God made the human being upright’ (7:29a) [the generic word *’ādām* implying both genders]. In his proposal of Ecclesiastes as a performance addressed to a third century BCE audience, Heim argues that the warning against women who trap and snare would have been relevant in the context of Greek colonization, where young Jewish men were being won over by foreign ideas and values (Heim 2023, p. 49). Heim’s discussion and the recent performance of *Words* underscore that the context of an audience will inevitably shape both performance and interpretation.

If the authors of biblical traditions were performers of those traditions in their first iterations, we can imagine them offering their words in the context of embodied, gathered audiences. They, along with their audiences, were making meaning of their traditions. A telling moment comes in Ecclesiastes where the Optimist relates a story of a poor man who used his wisdom to deliver a city under siege. Qohelet's response is 'and no human being remembers that man—that poor one!' (9:14–16). With our assumption that Ecclesiastes reflects the ruminations of an elite sage, we must wryly acknowledge along with Qohelet that it is only the powerful in society whose words are remembered. And yet, ironically, the story of that poor man *has* become enshrined as Scripture, albeit via the words of the author(s) behind the book of Qohelet, which were preserved, no doubt, due to repeated performance.

4. Conclusions

All biblical scholars are committed to the interpretation of ancient written texts, and BPC reminds interpreters that when these texts are understood as 'scripts', significant components that are not present in silent reading come to the fore. Audiences are influenced by the way the script is performed as well as the reactions of others around them. Moreover, the context—emotional, social, and political—contributes to shared interpretation. Meaning-making emerges from the dynamic relationship of performer, audience, text, and setting. When biblical texts are 'performed' in contemporary settings, new light is shed on familiar material and a greater connection is forged between our world and the biblical world.

Reflecting on a performance of Ecclesiastes scripted in the form of a television talk show with a host, three guests, and a musical duo, I have proposed that BPC has several advantages over Narrative Criticism as a means of engaging biblical texts. It links contemporary audiences to the earliest biblical communities, who experienced the traditions as complete works performed before gathered audiences. For contemporary audiences, a performance-sensitive translation aids in hearing repetition, word play, and pacing to give insights into the experience of the original audiences. And whether ancient or contemporary, audiences become more than just viewers when engaged by Scripture in embodied form. They are invited to see something new in the biblical tradition, and they become involved in its interpretation by both appreciating and disagreeing with the choices of the performers. Performance is itself a method of exploring interpretation that is shared and dynamic, contributing to the concept of multiple meanings held within the biblical tradition.

Performing Scripture as script adds insight and emotional impact for an audience, reminding us that when Scripture is incarnated in actual times and places, it becomes even more relevant for faithful communities.

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Notes

- ¹ David Rhoads discusses how 'biblical performances' could range from short oral communications in domestic, liturgical, or public settings to longer traditions that were written down and then shared through public presentations. (Rhoads 2023, p. xiii).
- ² Recent publications that have applied BPC to non-narrative texts include Levy (2000) on Song of Songs and Proverbs; Doan and Giles (2005) on Hebrew prophetic literature; Giles and Doan (2009) on poetic portions embedded in Hebrew literature; Oestreich (2016) on the Pauline letters; Agnew (2020) on the book of Romans; and the aforementioned volume on humour and performance edited by Perry (2023c), which includes chapters on Ecclesiastes (Heim 2023), Hebrews (Whitlark and Carman 2023), and John's Apocalypse (Perry 2023b). Admittedly, narrative criticism has been effectively applied to non-narrative genres also, such as Eugene Boring's commentary of 1 Peter (Boring 1999).
- ³ All translations are my own and, unless otherwise noted, all verse references are from the book of Ecclesiastes.
- ⁴ Heim's argument is based on the work of Stuart Weeks (Weeks 2020).

- 5 It will be obvious in the ensuing discussion that my view is heavily influenced by David Penchansky's *Understanding the Wisdom Literature* (Penchansky 2012, pp. 50–63), where he postulates three voices in Qohelet: Pessimistic Qohelet, Fear God Qohelet, and Enjoy Life Qohelet.
- 6 Prior to the publication of *Reading the Megillot* (Mathews 2023), my script of Lamentations as Performance Poetry had been effectively enacted by a theatre group that incorporated music and visual art in a more elaborately staged event.
- 7 www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJdvwXJmtbA&t=17s (accessed on 9 June 2023).
- 8 See, for example, the work of Niditch (1996) and Carr (2005), as well as collected essays edited by Kelber (2013) and Schmidt (2015).
- 9 My colleague, the Revd Dr Jane Foulcher, discussed translation in these terms in her launch speech for *Reading the Megillot* (Mathews 2023). The script of this address can be found at www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org (accessed on 9 June 2023).
- 10 Kelly Iverson similarly notes the neglect of emotions in biblical scholarship and devotes a chapter of his monograph *Performing Early Christian Literature* (Iverson 2021) to the emotional experience of audience engagement.

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