Performance Criticism as an Exegetical Method: A Story, Three Insights, and Two Jokes

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1. A Story

Once upon a time, seven blind men lost their way in the woods. After wandering for a while they arrived at a clearing and heard a voice say, "I am a green Helifant." The seven blind men were terrified. They had not heard of a green Helifant before.

But after a while their curiosity grew stronger than their fear, and the first blind man approached the strange creature. He touched its toes and said: "A green Helifant is very small." The second man climbed on the creature's back and shouted: "A green Helifant is very tall." The third one touched one tusk and said, "It is like a spear. It will kill us!" The fourth one touched the tail. "It is like a snake. It will bite us!" The fifth one smelled its breath and said, "It stinks like a garbage can." The sixth blind man was a very thoughtful man. He touched the toes, climbed on the back, inspected the tusk and the tail, and smelled the creature's breath, but because he was very thoughtful and did not want to jump to any conclusions, he did not say anything to anyone.

But the seventh blind man was like most exegetes. He was a coward. He said, "I will not go near the thing. I will analyze what it said. And it said that it is green. The *Rana clamitans melanota*, the Green Frog, is green. This creature is like a frog."

"Ha, ha, ha," the green Helifant shouted. "All of you are right," and laughing it disappeared into the forest.

The seven blind men finally found the way back to their village. But when they talked to their neighbors, nobody would believe them. None of them had ever heard of a green Helifant. "What should that be?" they said, "A creature that is tall and small at the same time, that is like a spear, like a snake, that stinks like garbage and looks like a frog? Never have we seen anything like that. – Ha, ha, ha!" the neighbors laughed and went back to their homes.

But the seven blind men knew that what they had experienced was true. They quarreled with each other by day and by night and if they have not died, they are listening to this story.

2. Three Insights

What does an elusive green Helifant have to do with the scholarly exploration of texts from antiquity? Three things: Scholars are blind, scholars learn through comparison, and scholars create consensus by communicating with each other.

Scholars are blind. We cannot experience past events directly, we have to do so indirectly. Even when we examine evidence, we cannot always see the significance. For example, we do not understand ancient calendars and ancient currency the way we understand our own. We are like blind men and women stumbling through a forest.

Scholars learn by comparing the unknown with the known. Because we cannot find answers to our questions by looking directly at our object of interest, we compare the new evidence with evidence that we have already placed in a context. We understand by relating the unknown to what we know. The better we paint the overall picture, the easier it is for us to place a new piece of evidence.

Scholars create consensus by communicating with each other. We strive for objectivity by verifying and accepting the experiences of our colleagues as if these experiences were our own. In this regard the seven blind men in our story fail. They do not acknowledge each other's observations and therefore are stuck in eternal discussions. Only the sixth blind man has a comprehensive experience. He touches the toes, climbs on the back, inspects the tail, and smells the creature's breath, but he does not communicate his experience to the others. If an experience is not shared, it is irrelevant to the scholarly discourse. This is why publishing is an essential part of scholarship and science. The German language does not differentiate between scholarship and science: both are called *Wissenschaft*. The word references a methodological approach to observations and theory: *ein Vorgang, der Wissen schafft.*

Scholarship constructs theories from verified text observations by controlling the process through documented *exegetical methods*. Exegetical methods describe paths through the jungle of evidence, promising that if you follow the proposed methodological guidelines, the seemingly random appearances will find structure and a consistent image will emerge.

The Greek word *theoria* is put together from *thea* and *horaō*. *Thea* can carry three meanings: the act of watching, the spectacle that is being watched, or the point from where something is watched. The basic meaning of *horaō* is: to see. In Greek literature, the word *theoria* describes the experience of a spectator at a sports game or at the theater, or in more general terms, the activity of observing and contemplating from a distance.

The connection between θέα (the view) and θεά (the Goddess) is intriguing. The words are spelled the same way but pronounced slightly differently. One of the characteristics generally attributed to the Divine is omnipresence, the ability to be everywhere at once. When scholars develop a theory they strive to put

seemingly disparate observations in a context that transcends time and place. If a theory works, it should be applicable to past and future events.

The word *methodos* is put together from *hodos*, the path, and the preposition *meta*, suggesting a way around something, or a way to follow in pursuit of knowledge. In narratives the word often translates as "trick" or "ruse."

In this sense an exegetical method is a way around. It is a trick, a ruse to look at a text from a distance and study it in context in order to extract an interpretation that was not apparent at first glance.

To give an example: The last sentence of Luke's gospel reads, "And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God" (Luke 24:52–53).[1]

The Greek word for "they were blessing" in some handwritten copies is *eulogountes*. But another manuscript tradition uses *ainountes*. There is no significant difference in meaning between these two words. Most surviving manuscripts, however, present both readings connected with "and" *ainountes kai eulogountes*, which the translators of the King James Version rendered as: they were "praising and blessing God."

On first sight these text observations may not make sense. The first edition of Luke certainly had only one of these three documented variants, didn't it? Why say the same thing twice? Why change a perfectly good word for another good word? And why combine two synonyms?

The Gospel According to Luke is not the only writing, the New Testament is not the only collection of writings, and the Christian Bible is not the only book transmitted by hand for hundreds of years. There is a wealth of evidence available outside of the Bible. By stepping back and looking at the evidence in the larger context of book production in antiquity, a theory can be developed about why these changes were made and who typically made them. After such a contextual theory is established, it can be applied to specific passages like Luke 25:53.

Studying cases where both the master manuscript and copies of this master manuscript are extant, scholars recognized a pattern. It seems that scribes who encountered two different readings in two different copies of the same text, tended to combine both by adding a conjunction.[2] This theory satisfies the observations made in Luke 24:53; only the conjunction *kai*, "and," is added between the two synonyms. The technical term for such readings is *conflation*, the flowing together of two or more traditions. The guiding principle suggested by this theory is that interpreters of conflate readings should assume that con-

[1] English quotations from the Bible present the NRSV. *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[2] *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Introduction, Appendix* (eds. B. F. Westcott and F. J. Anthony Hort; London: Macmillan, 1896), 49–52.

flation is younger and each one of the shorter readings is older than their combination.

A theory makes assumptions based on probability. It interprets the individual event within the context of the probable, not the possible. Probability is calculated by dividing the number of actual events with the number of possible events. The function of an exegetical method is to make an assessment of probability by studying actual events, discerning a pattern, and placing text observations within the context of this pattern.

performance criticism as an exegetical method encourages the interpreter to place text evidence within the context of what we know about actual performances of text in antiquity.

Performance Criticism and Form Criticism

The reading experience in antiquity differs considerably from a modern reading experience. Whereas reading is mostly a silent, solitary activity today, the manuscripts of antiquity were designed by authors, editors, and publishers to record sound; published literature was intended to serve as a script to be interpreted to an audience by a performer.[3] Form-critical approaches stress the importance of understanding the situation of communication in which a text functions, and performance criticism can provide the necessary contextual information.

"Sitz im Leben"

The Pope received a phone call from Jesus Christ. "The good news is that I have returned," Jesus said. "And the bad news?" the Pope asked. "I am calling from Salt Lake City."

Much will depend on who tells this joke and to whom. It makes a difference if a Mormon, a Catholic, a Protestant, or a Jewish person tells it. And it will make a difference who listens. The joke may mock Catholics (if a Mormon tells it to a Mormon), it may express an uneasiness with organized religion (if a Protestant tells it to a Protestant), or it may be an expression of poor taste (if a Jew tells it to a Catholic). In the context of this article the joke simply explains the form-critical term *Sitz im Leben* and the importance of assessing the situation of communication. Its historical value would be mostly sociological, documenting attitudes of a segment of the population. To the question of whether the Pope even answers phone calls, the joke contributes little.

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[3] D. Trobisch, "Structural Markers in New Testament Manuscripts with Special Attention to Observations in Codex Boernerianus (G 012) and Papyrus 46 of the Letters of Paul," *Pericope: Scripture as Written and Read in Antiquity, vol. 5: Layout Markers in Biblical Manuscripts and Ugaritic Tablets,* (eds. M. C. A. Korpel and J. M. Oesch; Assen: Koninklijke van Gorcum, 2005), 177–190.

Performance criticism and form criticism are closely related.[4] Form criticism tries to describe how a specific text was communicated by answering questions like: Who talks to whom, where, when, and why?

The Christian Bible is put together from texts that belong to a wide number of genres reflecting diverse communication settings. An Aramaic saying of Jesus may have changed its genre as it was translated into Greek and became part of a canonical gospel, and the genre may have changed again as it was used by Christians in their worship services. When we read Paul's letter to Rome today, we do not read the letter that was actually carried by a trusted messenger. We read Romans, as we call it, as part of a carefully arranged and edited collection of letters. The letter has ceased to be a private communication between two parties, protected from the preying eyes of outsiders. It is now directed to the public – it has become literature.[5]

Because traditional texts tend to shift their genre as they are passed on, many German Biblical scholars prefer to talk about *Formgeschichte*, the history of form, rather than *Formkritik*, form criticism.[6] Keeping in mind that the function of a text may change as the historical genre of the same text shifts, performance criticism concentrates on the moment a text is published, when it stops being a private communication between specific persons and becomes a communication between an author and an undefined public. performance criticism describes the impact of the Christian Bible as literature.

Jesus Tells a Bathroom Joke

In Matthew's gospel Jesus talks about hypocrites who stand at busy intersections and pray so others will see them. Jesus rebukes such practices and says, "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your

[4] Connections to other exegetical methods in addition to form criticism are explored by David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part II" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 (2006): 164–184. In this essay, Rhoads, who was one of the first New Testament scholars to promote performance of Biblical texts as an exegetical approach, compares performance criticism to form and genre criticisms; narrative, reader-response, and rhetorical criticisms; textual, oral, and social-science criticisms; speech act theory, linguistic criticism, and translation studies; ideological criticism, theater, and oral interpretation studies. The author concludes that performance criticism should be seen as a discrete exegetical approach in its own right.

[5] D. Trobisch, "Das Neue Testament im Lichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts, "*Herkunft und Zukunft der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft* (ed. O. Wischmeyer; *Neutestamentliche Entwürfe zur Theologie* 6; Tübingen, Basel: Francke, 2003, 119–129).

[6] M. Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1919); K. Koch, *Was ist Formgeschichte?: Methoden der Bibelexegese: Mit einem Nachwort, Linguistik und Formgeschichte.* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974); G. Theißen. *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten. Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien*, (Studien zum Neuen Testament 8, Gütersloh: Mohn, 1974); K. Berger. *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1984).

Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). Like our homes today, houses in antiquity had at least one room that could be locked: the bathroom. Jesus was trying to be funny; his original audience was expected to laugh.

Once an interpreter accepts the form-critical assessment that this saying of Jesus may be based on a joke he made in public, the irony of the other statements in the context becomes apparent. How likely is it that a pious person would stand at a street corner and pray in order to be seen? Or that he or she would have someone "sound the trumpet" when they went to give alms "in the synagogues and in the streets" (Matt 6:2)? Don't we know from our own standup comedians that exaggeration is part of a strategy to make us laugh at ourselves? If Jesus was joking, then the criticism of the "hypocrites" might just be a criticism from within, a call for renewal, an attempt to communicate through humor. Jesus, a pious Jew, is asking other pious Jews to return to their own ideals, to remember God's commandments and promises.

The text continues, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name [...]" (Matt 6:8–9). The editor of the Sermon on the Mount, who used the saying of Jesus to introduce the Lord's Prayer, may have already missed the irony. The genre shifted from a joke to an exhortation. And in the tradition of Christian preaching, Jesus' caricature of a Pharisee has often been interpreted as disparaging Jews; it was easily turned into political propaganda. Considering the medieval pogroms and the mass murder of Jews in the 20th century, committed by professed Christians, this misinterpretation is no laughing matter.

Experimental

In 1947 the Norwegian anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl and five other daring seafarers launched a balsa wood raft outside the port of Callào in Peru. They sailed more than 4000 miles across the Pacific Ocean and landed on the Raroia Atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago 101 days later.[7] The voyage demonstrated that it was possible for a primitive raft to sail the Pacific and that Polynesia was well within the range of prehistoric South American seafarers. Based on linguistic, physical, and genetic evidence, however, many anthropologists remain convinced that Polynesia was settled from the Asian mainland in the west and not from South America. But some apparent American influences like the sweet potato as part of the Polynesian diet find a satisfactory explanation in Thor Heyerdahl's theory.

In very much the same way performance criticism of the New Testament can demonstrate possibilities and create plausibility for new understandings that

[7] Th. Heyerdahl, *The Kon-Tiki Expedition: By Raft Across the South Seas* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950).

otherwise seem far-fetched. Like experimental archeology, which recreates tools, events, and settings of the period studied, performance criticism recreates the situation of a performance of literature for which the New Testament originally had been designed. And like experimental archaeology, performance criticism can be used to test methods and theories.[8]

Experiential

By performing the text, the word becomes flesh. Interpreters explore possible authorial intentions, the basic structure of the argument, reactions from the audience, and subtexts of underlying humor and irony, some or all of which might have escaped their attention had they only studied the text sitting at a desk and reading it quietly to themselves.

During a performance, text is simply experienced; the analysis takes place afterwards, when an emotional distance from the performance has been established. A debriefing session after the performance, preferably the following day, will typically help students reach a high level of exegetical and theological reflection.

After engaging text through performance, one often finds that a specific text can be understood in more than one valid way. Like other forms of art, performance of literature will only present one of several possible interpretations, not necessarily the most authoritative one, or a scholastically viable reading. Especially in those rare cases when the setting allows for repeat performances before the same audience, and the interpreter performs the same text in several different ways, the multi-faceted nature of human communication through art becomes evident. Developing a variety of possible interpretations is a crucial step of scholarly discourse; the performance of texts before an audience helps to achieve this goal.

Historical Criticism

Like other literary critical assessments, performance criticism may be perceived as opposing the historical critical approach prevalent in Biblical Studies since the Enlightenment. This is not accurate. Whereas more traditional methods like source criticism and tradition criticism concentrate on the early stages of texts, i.e. the written sources and oral traditions that were used to weave a text together, performance criticism as a historical approach concentrates on the moment the finished literary product is presented to the public for the first time. Obviously, the authorial intention at the time of publication is limited to the

[8] J. M. Coles, *Experimental Archaeology* (London: Academic Press, 1979). *Experimental Archeology* (eds. D. W. Ingersoll, J. E. Yellen, and William Macdonald; New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

implied author's intention as promoted by the publisher, and does not necessarily represent the original message of the historical author.

For example, in the New Testament, Acts is presented as the account of Luke (Acts 1:1–2 references the third gospel), the account of Paul's travel companion (we-passages in Acts, cf. Acts 28:11ff.) and the account of the physician (Col 4:14), who finishes his narrative while Paul is still alive (Acts 28:30–31). Each of these statements is contested on historical grounds. But at the same time, if the implied author and the implied literary setting are dismissed, the text will not function anymore as it was designed when published.[9]

Furthermore, historical-critical approaches tend to concentrate their efforts on genuine material only. They are interested in the historical author and audience. One of the strengths of any literary approach, including performance criticism, is to give spurious material the voice it deserves. Spurious writings are an attempt, sometimes a desperate attempt, to contextualize a cherished tradition, to reinterpret it, to make it meaningful for an audience at a time and place quite different from the original setting of the writing.

Summary

Performance Criticism takes the character of New Testament texts as Hellenistic literature seriously. As a historical method it recreates the situation for which these texts were designed, and encourages the interpreting performer to experiment and explore multiple possibilities of authorial intention, structure, argument, and audience reactions through the act of performing the text before an audience. As a literary approach it encourages the student to appreciate the beauty of the New Testament as literature.

[9] D. Trobisch, "Die narrative Welt der Apostelgeschichte," ZNT 18 (2006): 9–14.