Performance Criticism of the Narratives in the Hebrew Bible

By

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Abstract

Meir Sternberg suggested that there are two basic ways to divide the various approaches to biblical studies: source-oriented and discourse-oriented. Source-oriented critics are concerned with “recreating the biblical world as it really was,” and discourse-oriented critics concern themselves with understanding the received text “as a pattern of meaning and effect.” Conflict results, however, when these disparate approaches attempt to define the genre of the biblical narratives. The source-oriented critic suggests historiography; the discourse-oriented critic suggests fiction. Sternberg, frustrated with the lack of collaboration, called for a “closer interworking of text and context.” In his attempt to do that, he suggests a modified version of historiography as the genre of the biblical narratives.

Careful analysis of recent data concerning the oral character of ancient Israelite culture suggests not only that Sternberg’s categories are inadequate, but that the genre of the biblical narratives has eluded source- and discourse-oriented critics alike. Scholars generally agree that the literacy rate of ancient Israel, at least up until the eighth century B.C.E., was extremely low, possibly even as low as 1%.¹ Israel was a thoroughly oral culture. Therefore, all communication took place in person. The stories would not have been read; they would have been memorized and performed. When the stories were eventually committed to writing, as Israel transitioned from an oral culture to a text-oriented culture, they retained their fundamentally oral character. Indeed, the classic dramatic structure runs like a vein through every biblical narrative, revealing the “oral residue” of the narratives’ performative past. Therefore, I propose that the best label for the genre of the biblical narratives is neither historiography nor fiction, but rather drama.

An oral text demands an approach that is sensitive to its orality. Performance criticism, an emerging discipline in biblical studies, offers just that. The methodology and theology of performance criticism is explained in depth, and an analysis of the book of Jonah is given to illustrate the inherent dramatic character of these ancient scripts.

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Chapter 1
Discourse and Source in Biblical Interpretation

Two Approaches to the Bible

For the last two to three centuries, scholars have been developing new ways to approach the Old Testament. Historical criticism ushered in a new era of biblical scholarship, and many of the succeeding approaches have either sprung from it, or were formed as a reaction against it. The last fifty years or so have seen a proliferation of new approaches to the Bible. To the standard historical criticism scholars have added structural criticism, rhetorical criticism, sociological criticism, canonical criticism, to name a few. Many have grown uncomfortable with this proliferation of approaches and are calling the field of biblical studies back to something more unifying and fundamental.² Meir Sternberg, in his landmark study, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, suggests that there are essentially two ways of approaching the Hebrew Scriptures: source-oriented and discourse-oriented.³

According to Sternberg, source-oriented approaches address themselves to “the biblical world as it really was.”⁴ The historian wants to know the historical background, the linguist wants to know the nuances of the language, the geneticist [source critic] wants to know the history of the transmission of the text. In each case, their interest

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focuses on something behind the text which influenced its composition.\textsuperscript{5} The dilemma of any of these source-oriented approaches is, of course, that the received text (discourse) is the primary artifact through which anything definitive about the context (source) can be determined. The two are not easily separated.

Discourse-oriented approaches, on the other hand, “set out to understand not the realities behind the text but the text itself as a pattern of meaning and effect.”\textsuperscript{6} These scholars analyze the received text according to its use of language, the way it constructs meaning and communicates its message. It tries to understand the speaker’s meaning and the effect it has on the community. It asks questions like: What image of a world does the narrative project? Why does it unfold the action in this particular order and from this particular viewpoint? In what relationship does part stand to whole and form to function?\textsuperscript{7} Discourse-oriented analysis arose, partly as a reaction to the excesses of the source-oriented approaches, and in so doing, often overcompensated by elevating discourse over and against source.

Sternberg argues that each camp’s neglect of, even animosity toward the other has weakened the field of biblical studies. In fact, he suggests that this mutual rejection produces an “impossibility.” This impossibility is the divorcing of discourse and source, “as if one could read a text out of any context or contextualize it without reading.” But he does not stop with criticism; he offers a suggestion that is as profound as it is simple: “Both the interpreter and the historian must perforce combine the two viewpoints throughout, incessantly moving between given discourse and inferred source in an

\textsuperscript{5} Sternberg, \textit{Poetics}, 15.
\textsuperscript{6} Sternberg, \textit{Poetics}, 15.
\textsuperscript{7} Sternberg, \textit{Poetics}, 15.
endeavor to work out the best fit, until they reach some firm conclusion.” Therefore, Sternberg advocates for a “closer interworking of text and context” in the interpretive process. This “closer interworking” invites the two “enemy camps” to cross the divide and learn from each other, sharing resources to enable communal discovery.

The rest of this chapter will illumine the contours of the divide between source-oriented and discourse-oriented analysis, and will conclude by offering, in response to Sternberg’s call for a “closer interworking of text and context,” a proposal for doing just that.

**Source-Oriented Approaches**

Source-oriented approaches do not just emphasize source over discourse; they tend to elevate the one over the other. How, exactly, do they do this? Take, for example, the historical-critical method, the preeminent source-oriented approach to the Bible. Many articles and books have been written over the last several decades exposing the unspoken assumptions of the historical-critical method. John Piper, though he does not always sympathetically engage those he criticizes, nevertheless states the issues sharply. I will lean heavily on his article in my analysis of these issues, but will draw from others as well.

Ernst Troeltsch, in the late nineteenth century, laid out three basic assumptions that underlie the historical-critical method: correlation, analogy, criticism. These three form the general rubric within which source-oriented approaches to the Bible function.

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The principle of correlation suggests that all events operate within a strict (closed) system of cause and effect. The principle of analogy, put positively, suggests, “all events have at least some similarity with some other event, there being no event which is unique.”\footnote{11} Put negatively, the principle of analogy precludes the possibility of a wholly unique event from the start, regardless of the quantity or quality of evidence, historical or otherwise, to support it. In the third place, the principle of criticism posits “the passing of probability judgments upon the claims of historical records, on the basis of what is analogous to our present knowledge.”\footnote{12} In the words of Ernst Troeltsch:

> The analogy of what happens before our eyes and is found within us is the key to criticism. Illusions, alterations, construction of myths, deceit, factiousness which we see before our eyes are the means of recognizing such things in the traditions. The mark of probability for events which criticism can allow to have happened or not is agreement with normal, usual or often witnessed actions or circumstances as we know them. The observation of analogies between similar past events makes it possible for us to accord them probability and to interpret the unknown of one from what is known of the other.\footnote{13}

When these principles are applied to the Bible, they can only lead to the elevation of a particular understanding of source over and against discourse. Take Rudolf Bultmann, for example. He argues,

> The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect . . . [T]his closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural powers.\footnote{14}

\footnotetext{12}{Piper, “Historical Criticism,” 329.}
\footnotetext{13}{Quoted in Piper, “Historical Criticism,” 329.}
\footnotetext{14}{Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?,” \textit{Encounter} 21, no. 2 S (1960): 194-200.}
As the epistemological starting point for analyzing and interpreting the Bible, this approach effectively reads God out of the Bible, and reduces the God of the Bible to an “interference.”

This framework assumes a particular understanding of history. As Lesslie Newbigin points out, “History was understood as providential history from Augustine until the eighteenth century. Arguments about God’s providence and his purposes were as natural in a debate in the House of Commons as they would be astonishing today.”

History, according to Troeltsch, Bultmann, and other source-oriented critics, however, is a closed system, protected from divine “interference” in which all events operate within a strict cause-effect relationship.

The principles of correlation, analogy, and criticism constitute a particular kind of rationality that historical-critical scholars assume is objective, universal, and value-free. In a paper presented to the Society of Biblical Literature, Colin Yuckman traces this tradition that undergirds the historical-critical method back to the Enlightenment. He writes, “Reason, pitted against religion, claims to be the only value-free, objective, universal, and trans-historical dogma worth holding . . . however, even the concept of rationality is conditioned by time and culture.” This notion of rationality not only defines the parameters of historical inquiry, but also determines what that inquiry considers to be plausible or implausible.

The definition of what is plausible stems from a modern, secular, scientific view of reality quite different from the one espoused by the likes of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

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According to Troeltsch et al., the presence and activity of a supernatural being in the life and events of the people of Israel is implausible according to their understanding of history. The resultant methodology, as I have already suggested, precludes not only the presence of God in history, but also the possibility of divine revelation in history, because it defies analogy.

It is not surprising, then, that Peter Stuhlmacher defines the historical-critical method as “that procedure of historical scholarship developed in the wake of the Enlightenment with whose help written historical traditions are methodically analyzed and subjected to the modern judgment of reason.”¹⁷ This definition implicitly highlights the anachronistic tendencies of the historical-critical method. Sternberg laments, “[T]he main trouble with the historical approaches to the Bible is their antihistorical performance.” He continues, “In their concern with whatever frames or antecedes the text, the historians tend to overlook the chief body of historical evidence that awaits proper interpretation.”¹⁸ This evidence is, of course, the text itself. The biblical text is our primary resource for understanding the context out of which the Bible rose. Historical-critical scholars tend, however, to view the discourse with varying degrees of disregard, articulated well by Bultmann, which inhibits them from approaching the Bible on its own terms or attempting to understand the world from the Bible’s perspective, rather than the other way around.

Jon Levenson offers a shrewd observation about historical critical scholars. When they assume that God is not present in the world and invisible forces are not operating in

¹⁷ Quoted in Piper, “Historical Criticism,” 329.
¹⁸ Sternberg, Poetics, 11.
the world, they base this assumption not on empirical evidence, but on some kind of revelation. Levenson observes ironically that these scholars “are actually asserting a secular analogy to a religious revelation: they are claiming to have a definitive insight, not empirically derived, into the meaning of things, even things that they have never directly experienced and that are interpreted very differently by those who have.”

This is a great irony. In their quest to recreate the past, historical-critical scholars often end up, to some extent, projecting some version of the present into the empty space behind the scenes of the text. Stuhlmacher wonders whether it is a need to control which has made it customary for critical exegesis all too quickly to view the reality spoken of in the Biblical text as antiquated and to seek for something behind what is presented instead of allowing that reality to stand with its own distinct, historical worth . . . as a challenge to our contemporary understanding of reality.

He proposes another hermeneutical posture. The historical-critical method assumes a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” This posture considers all faith claims with suspicion, and asserts an alternative motivation for the claim being made which ultimately serves the purpose of negating the faith claim. In contrast to this, Stuhlmacher advocates for a “hermeneutic of consent,” in which the critic takes a posture of openness toward the claims being made. It is a “new openness to the world, that is, a willingness to open ourselves anew to the claim of tradition, of the present and of transcendence.” The hermeneutic of suspicion proffered by the historical-critical method elevates source over and against discourse because, as Yuckman points out, it “appears to operate more within

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20 Quoted in Piper, “Historical Criticism,” 331.
the scope of the interpreter’s conditioned sense of plausibility than within a real openness to the reality of the text at hand.” By contrast, a hermeneutic of consent acquiesces to the reality implied and offered by the text and attempts to allow it to challenge the critic’s own understanding of reality. Karl Möller put it this way:

[W]hile it is perfectly legitimate, and indeed inevitable, that we approach texts with preconceived ideas and values . . . it is important that we allow the text to criticize these and, by so doing, to contribute to the re-conceptualization of our position and indeed the reshaping of our own selves. By doing this, the scholar engages both the discourse and her own life experience in order to make sense of the inferred source, which cannot be understood in isolation from either.

**Discourse-Oriented Approaches**

Discourse-oriented scholarship arose, in part, as a reaction against the source-elevated excesses of the historical-critical method. Frustrated by its neglect of the text itself, it sought to bring all the tools of literary analysis to bear on the Bible. Robert Alter, one of the first literary critics to apply a discourse-oriented methodology to Scripture is a good example of this, as his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* remains a classic in the field today. Part of the legacy of Alter and others like him was to remind the field of biblical studies of the necessity of understanding the literary genre(s) of the biblical writings in order to make sense of the discourse. Failure to understand the genre, the argument goes, inevitably leads one to misread the text (discourse), and therefore to misunderstand its role in Israelite society (source). Alter endeavors in this work to bear the fruit of a literary analysis of Scripture, and to offer it as a necessary corrective to the

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source-orientation of what he calls “excavative scholarship”\textsuperscript{24}—using analytical tools on
texts as a spade and trowel to dig up historical artifacts. However, the polemical context
out of which discourse-oriented analysis grew often produced the opposite effect of
elevating discourse over and against source. In my analysis below I will make frequent
use of Meir Sternberg’s \textit{The Poetics of Biblical Narrative}, as Sternberg uses Alter as a
conversation partner to illustrate the importance of a balance between source and
discourse in the study of Scripture.

It would appear as though Alter, in making his central claim, was aware of how
radical it was in contrast to the prevailing source-oriented ethos of his contemporaries.
“As odd as it may sound at first,” he begins, “I would contend that prose fiction is the
best general rubric for describing biblical narrative. Or, to be more precise, and to borrow
a key term from Herbert Schneidau . . . we can speak of the Bible as \textit{historicized} prose
fiction.”\textsuperscript{25} In addition to the use of pure invention, Alter defines “historicized prose
fiction” as “the imaginative reenactment of history by a gifted writer who organizes his
materials along certain thematic biases and according to his own remarkable intuition of
the psychology of the characters.”\textsuperscript{26}

Alter builds on the previous work of Erich Auerbach and Herbert Schneidau who
both noted the presence of “imaginative” content in the biblical narratives. Characters are
“agents” with a “stamp of individuality” who experience “contradictory motives”; their
full personhood is explored in the conflicts they face. Both see this as a break from the
prevailing cyclical understanding of nature held by Israel’s neighbors in which humans

\textsuperscript{25} Alter, \textit{Art}, 24, italics his.
\textsuperscript{26} Alter, \textit{Art}, 35.
are caught up in the cosmic cycles of the world, do not exert their own agency, and do not have distinctive individuality. Auerbach, who wrote first, sees this imaginative element as moving towards modern day history-writing; Schneidau, who read Auerbach, sees it as moving toward modern day fiction-writing. Alter favored Schneidau’s assessment, and developed it further in his book. Sternberg notes the irony that the same imaginative element, initially intended to suggest the historical nature of the biblical narratives, ended up being used to suggest its fictionality.²⁷

This illustrates the ambiguity in the terms *history* and *fiction*, complicated further by Alter’s imprecise use of each. Alter begins by recognizing the similarities between history writing and fiction writing, which “obviously share a whole range of narrative strategies,” not least of which involves the employment of “imaginative constructs.”²⁸ Alter contends, however, that there exists a qualitative difference between history writing and fiction writing, which close scrutiny of the discourse at hand will make apparent. This scrutiny reveals first and foremost the employment of invention and the use of ancient literary conventions. A reader’s awareness of these conventions enables one to “discriminate between the verisimilar and the fabulous, pick up directional clues in a narrative work, see what is innovative and what is deliberately traditional at each nexus of the artistic creation.”²⁹ A close scrutiny of Alter’s argument, however, reveals its circular nature: though history and fiction writing share similar narrative conventions, these same conventions are the very clues that separate the one from the other.

²⁹ Alter, *Art*, 47.
As Sternberg points out, each term—*history* and *fiction*—can be used to represent both source and discourse. As source, “history” denotes “what really happened,” and “fiction” the realm of the imagined or invented. As discourse, “history” refers to a “re-creative” endeavor, and “fiction” to essentially “creative” discourse.  

Within this matrix of ambiguity, the shift of meaning results in a confusion: history-writing is equated with factual truth and fiction-writing is opposed to it. Sternberg suggests, however, “History-writing is not a record of fact—of what ‘really happened’—but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free inventions but a discourse that claims freedom of invention.”  

Both may contain varying degrees of factual truth, but the difference lies in their respective commitments to and claims to the truthfulness of what their discourse represents. “The difference between truth value and truth claim is fundamental.” Therefore, both history and fiction, as discourse, are “functional categories” that may each take on a variety of formal variations that are “distinguishable only by their overall sense of purpose.”  

So the key to distinguishing fiction from history-writing is not to locate the presence of literary conventions within the discourse, but rather to discern the way the discourse *functions* in context, and, by inference, in the life of the people who passed the stories down and eventually collected them into the Old Testament.

Sternberg’s claim is that the genre of the biblical narratives is historiography rather than fiction, or even historicized prose fiction. This is so because the narratives make the

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claim that Israel’s God is not the product of an inventive author or the projection of a primitive community’s deepest yearnings, but is Himself the Creator and Author of history. Israel told their stories because they believed that they actually had happened. In fact, the biblical worldview is predicated on this belief. “Were the narrative written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous results.” Sternberg nuances his definition of historiography in relation to that of the historical critics, claiming “the linkage of history writing to documentation is a rather late arrival, born of an empirical spirit that has not escaped criticism even among moderns.” But, disappointingly, he leaves his clarification there without further development.

Alter’s designation of the genre of biblical narrative as historicized prose fiction also assumes a particular understanding of the historical context, and how the narratives functioned within it. Alter describes the process this way,

These stories are not, strictly speaking, historiography, but rather the imaginative reenactment of history by a gifted writer who organizes his materials along certain thematic biases and according to his own remarkable intuition of the psychology of the characters. He feels entirely free, one should remember, to invent interior monologue for his characters; to ascribe feeling, intention, or motive to them when he chooses; to supply verbatim dialogue . . . for occasions when no one but the actors themselves could have had knowledge of exactly what was said.

Alter is attempting to account for the presence of inaccessible knowledge being presented as historical fact. Up until roughly the eighteenth century this would have been understood without difficulty as divinely inspired material, which did not call its historical claims into question. This view is no longer compatible with the prevailing

34 Sternberg, Poetics, 32.
35 Sternberg, Poetics, 32.
36 Alter, Art, 35.
notions of reason, which demand empirical evidence to support all truth claims.

However, if the Bible is to be read on its own terms, divine inspiration is necessary. In the socio-cultural context of ancient Israel, “truth claim and free access to information go together owing to a discourse mechanism so basic that no contemporary would need to look around for it—the appeal to divine inspiration.”37 The biblical writers assumed divine inspiration, and if we are to approach the text on its own terms, as readers, we have no choice but to accept it—just like we must accept any number of other biblical premises and conventions, “from the existence of God to the sense borne by specific words—or else invent our own text.”38

This complicates the issue of determining the genre of the biblical narratives, for the presence of inspired content coupled with the biblical claim to tell the truth about history renders the label “historiography” unacceptable in the modern sense of the word. And, ironically, it is likewise the appeal to divine inspiration in the light of the biblical claim to historicity that erodes the possibility of prose fiction—even historicized prose fiction—as the appropriate designation. Two questions persist: What is the genre of the biblical narratives? How did they function in the life of ancient Israel? These two questions highlight not only the need for a “closer interworking of text and context” when interpreting the Bible, but also for “a community or overlap rather than a division of labor” between source- and discourse-oriented critics.

37 Sternberg, Poetics, 32.
38 Sternberg, Poetics, 34-35.
Towards a Closer Interworking of Text and Context

For Alter, Schneidau, and other discourse-oriented critics, the genre of the biblical narratives is fiction. For source-oriented critics, they are documented histories, awaiting excavation. These, as I have just shown, are unacceptable, as they elevate either source or discourse over and against the other, and therefore fall short of acting as a “community.” Sternberg, though selecting a “discourse-oriented approach” for his own inquiry, nevertheless attempts to maintain a balance between source and discourse. From this perspective he suggests the genre as historiography, though without the trappings of the modern documentary impulse, and with the understanding that the authors shamelessly claim a higher Source for much of their material. If the genre is historiography, it is a historiography peculiar to Israelite culture. But, due to the modern conventions of history-writing, and elements in the text which historiography does not account for, I am not convinced that this is an adequate description either.

I wonder if part of the difficulty is due to the categories Sternberg uses: source and discourse. Certainly they help clarify what is at stake in the interpretive process, and the various approaches to Scripture generally fall neatly into place beneath them. However, my experience has revealed the dividing line between source-oriented and discourse-oriented analysis to be somewhat of a false dichotomy. It seems to me that text and context can be linked more closely than by “a community or overlap” of divided disciplines. There may be another way to approach Scripture that fits into neither category, or both simultaneously.
One such approach is performance criticism. On the one hand, Sternberg’s categories combine to make a compelling claim for performance criticism. Performance criticism draws heavily upon the work of historical scholarship and also pays very careful attention to the text itself, and so it seems to be a way of upholding both source and discourse analysis simultaneously. This, it could be said, is the critical half of performance criticism. On the other hand, the performative half of performance criticism demands the creation of new categories altogether, and new ways of conceiving the dynamics of the interpretive process. Source and discourse analysis assume a particular understanding of time and space, of history and reality, of world and word. A performance of a biblical narrative, however, engages with time and space in a way that is entirely different and offers a transformational encounter with Scripture not unlike how the ancient Israelites would have encountered it in worship three thousand years ago. In a performance, the biblical text and the biblical context come alive in and through the bodies, sounds, movements and gestures of the performers before the gathered community. A performance renders the biblical story a moment in space and time, the text becomes a living reality that can be seen, heard, and taken in by one’s whole being. Perhaps, in this light, source can be seen as one “dimension” of the text, discourse as another “dimension,” and performance as the “third dimension” of the text.

Performance criticism is an emerging field in biblical studies, and at present there are not sufficient categories to articulate its function and significance in relation to the other available approaches. Consider Shakespeare’s Hamlet. There is a scholarly branch of theater studies that researches the formative history of Shakespeare’s works. These
scholars do textual analyses, redaction criticism, and even consider the potentiality of various sources of Shakespeare’s plays, suggesting that he may not have written each of them himself. There is scholarly consensus that *Hamlet* is the work of Shakespeare’s own hand, yet various manuscripts exist that contain a variety of textual variants. Further, source-oriented analysts can research the historical context of Shakespeare’s day, the king who commissioned him to write the play, the personal issues he underwent over the course of writing that may have impacted the play, etc. Discourse analysts also study Shakespeare. They analyze the script itself: his use of language, the repetition of key phrases, the various themes he works out subtly and explicitly over the course of the play. This is all helpful information for understanding Shakespeare, his influences, and how he masterfully weaves political, social and psychological elements into his plays. However, these endeavors are not ends in themselves. They serve a larger purpose. The script of *Hamlet* does not come to life by studying Shakespeare’s historical context. *Hamlet* comes to life when an actor assumes his role and lets him speak again in a performance. This is what the historical and literary work helped accomplish, and where it finds its fulfillment. I am arguing that it is the same way with Scripture.

Thirty years ago Meir Sternberg issued a challenge to the field of biblical studies to return to a place of greater unity in the interpretation of Scripture. His own offering made important use of the material garnered by discourse- and source-oriented analysts alike. There are, however, aspects of both the text and the context that deserve more in-depth treatment than they have yet received. Over the past fifty years or so advancements have also been made in the understanding of oral cultures, and the implications of orality on a
people’s understanding of reality, the shaping of communal priorities, the relationship between the people and both time and space, and even the impact of orality on writing.

In chapter two I will argue that the Hebrew people were not only thoroughly oral, but also largely non-literate. The vast majority of the people of Israel could not read or write, and therefore orality was a primary lens through which they experienced both the world around them, and their past. Because the biblical stories were birthed and transmitted in this oral context, they must have been performed in some fashion. Any spoken communication between two or more people necessarily involved the physical presence of every person. In formal settings, the stories were *told*, and therefore were performed.

Eventually the stories were committed to writing and collected into the Hebrew Bible. However, their present form reveals signs of their oral past: the stories are dialogue-driven, speech happens in the present tense, and the classic dramatic structure gives shape to every story. In light of this, I will argue that the genre of the biblical narratives is drama, rather than historiography or prose fiction. The biblical dramas are ancient scripts.

As scripts, then, the stories must be performed in order to reach their fullest potential. Performance Criticism is a methodology designed to enable the student to engage a biblical drama as an oral document—a script—rather than as a text. Performance Criticism’s two basic movements—memorization and performance—will be fleshed out to complete chapter two.
In chapter three I will move from telling to showing by giving a dramatic analysis of the book of Jonah. My analysis will demonstrate the potency of performance criticism as an exegetical method, and will also illustrate how it provides an answer to Sternberg’s call for both a “closer interworking of text and context,” and “a community or overlap of disciplines.” My comments will focus on the ways performance criticism reveals the deeper meanings and movements in a text by incarnating the reality latent in the script into a living, embodied reality on stage. I will accomplish this by describing a performance of Jonah 1, and the manifold insights the performance revealed to the drama’s meaning, both for the ancient Hebrews, as well as for us today.
Chapter 2
Orality, Oral Residue, and Performance Criticism

The Orality of the People of Israel

Source-oriented critics have contributed to the awareness of the oral character of ancient Israelite society. Though there is debate about the exact numbers, by most estimates the literacy rate during the Roman era in first century Palestine at the time of Jesus was around 5% or less. It is generally agreed that the literacy rate was lower even than this in ancient Israel. Regardless of whether the literacy rate was 3% or 12%, the fact of the matter is the vast majority of Israelites could neither read nor write and the fabric of society was shaped accordingly. With 90% or more of the members of society unable to read or write, it is clear that ancient Mediterranean cultures were overwhelmingly oral in nature.

This is not to suggest, however, that every oral culture is identical. To be sure, every culture is unique, and that is true for oral cultures as well. Nevertheless, observations can be made with accuracy that apply to oral cultures in general. Walter Ong spent much of his life’s work studying oral cultures and the relationship between the spoken and written word. At the most elemental level, says Ong, the spoken word creates and sustains an oral culture. “The word is originally, and in the last analysis irretrievably, 39

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a sound phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{42} In oral cultures, sound creates and sustains reality. It is the basic medium of communication, and is a necessary component for all meaningful interaction. Therefore, all communication necessarily takes place within the context of relationships. These relationships form the basis for the community’s identity.

Contemporary western culture is characterized by the proliferation of print and electronic forms of communication. From this context, it is difficult to grasp the dynamics of an oral culture. In oral cultures, the emphasis falls on \textit{presence}. All interpersonal communication demands the physical presence of those who wish to communicate, for they would be unable to speak to or hear one another unless they were gathered together in one place. Oral cultures are communal cultures in which the group identity is primary, and the individual identity is understood in light of the group.\textsuperscript{43} This was certainly true for Israel.\textsuperscript{44} Because of the radical individualism espoused by western culture, a gap exists between our experience of reality and that of the ancient Israelites. This gap is difficult for us to bridge. Building materials exist, however, that may make the journey possible.

Consider the process involved in speaking and hearing. Speech is a dynamic encounter between two or more people. The speaker fills her lungs with air and exhalates, passing the air over her vocal chords, causing them to vibrate and thus create sound. This sound reverberates in her mouth and sinus and increases in volume. From here it passes over tongue and teeth and lips as it is formed into a particular sound representing a reality.

\textsuperscript{43} Rhoads, “Performance Criticism,” 121.
\textsuperscript{44} On this point, see Joel Kaminsky’s treatment of the corporate nature of the covenant’s relationship with Israel’s corporate responsibility in Joel S. Kaminsky, \textit{Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible}, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), esp. 30-54.
that is mutually accepted by the two parties. From here the sound waves travel through
the air and eventually crash into the ear of the listener. This interaction literally moves the
listener, as their eardrums vibrate and send the signal to the brain where it is processed
and understood. When we speak to each other we touch each other, we move each other;
what is inside of one ends up getting inside the other. Speech is an intimate interaction, a
dynamic interaction. It is also something that is deeply mysterious. “Sound is an agent of
inwardness and mystery. It provokes and disturbs.”45 We do not have a strong sense of
the visceral power of speech today. Israel, however, was steeped in the tradition of the
power of the spoken word.

The opening verses of Scripture offer the most concise articulation of the power of
the spoken word. Just as God inaugurated speech and through that act created the
physical world in which we live, so too, when we speak, we mimic his creative act and
create worlds of our own: worlds of meaning, significance, and communion. Today, we
understand the power of words to create reality most poignantly when we say something
that we want immediately to take back. However, once spoken, the word takes on a life
and significance of its own, sometimes far beyond our original intentions. The spoken
word has the power to give and sustain life, but also the power to diminish and weaken
life. In short, words create worlds. And the worlds thus created can either participate with
God in sustaining God’s good creation, or can work against that by sowing discord and
division, resulting in decay.

45 Belden Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, (New York: Paulist
Israel understood the sacred power of speech. It was the spoken word that created the world and sustained it moment by moment. It was the spoken word that bound them together as a nation. It was the spoken word that united them to their past, and particularly to their ancestors, and through them to God. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the ancestors in Israelite society and piety. Like other ancient peoples, the people of Israel remembered the past in a particular way. Walter Ong highlights two significant aspects of an oral culture’s and a print/electronic culture’s understanding of the past:

An oral-aural [voice-ear] culture . . . has no records. It does have memory, but this is not by any means the same as records, for the written record is not a remembrance but an aid to recall. It does not belong to us as memory does. It is an external thing.\(^{46}\)

Ong explains, first, that memory is embodied; it lives inside the remembering person or community and is manifested through ritual and performance. In other words, Israel’s ancestors were not abstracted into marks on a page, but rather were remembered, and therefore were kept alive, through both ritual and informal performances of their stories. They continued to walk and talk and exert their influence in shaping the community’s identity through the recital of their stories.

In a performance, therefore, the ancestor was not quoted as saying such and such, but rather spoke the words himself, through the performer. The evidence for this is in the text itself: the characters speak in the present tense. Not only this, but the peculiarity of the vav-consecutive tense (which every drama is narrated using) suggests that those who performed, and those who eventually wrote these dramas down, did not believe that they

\(^{46}\) Ong, *Presence*, 23.
were merely historical events, which were now over and done. The vav-consecutive tense is, technically, the present or future tense, not the past, even though it is translated that way. Therefore, just like in contemporary theatre, the performance rendered the historical event into a new “now.” The role of the performer(s), then, was similar to that of a priest, mediating the presence and blessing of God through the stories of the ancestors’ experiences of God, so that they could once again speak into the present context of the people’s lives. Belden Lane, commenting on the similar function of storytellers in the oral traditions of Native American spirituality suggests these performers functioned “as custodians of a sacred fire, searching the collective memory of a people, evoking the presence of hallowed ancestors.”

Second, Ong explains that an oral culture’s relationship to the past is characterized by memory rather than documentation. Sternberg reminded us that documentation is a uniquely modern impulse in relation to history-writing. It is indisputable that Israel had an alphabet and that they had texts. Though Israel’s purpose for committing their stories to writing, the time at which they did so, and the function those written texts had in the society is a matter of debate, there is an emerging awareness in the study of oral cultures that, contrary to the formerly held opinion, “orality and literacy can interact in…complementary ways” in a given society. The relationship between the two, as Ong implied above, is that the latter served the former. Written records aided the community’s memory, which was embodied in their ritual and worship life. Israel’s scrolls were not mere documents; their purpose was not merely to store

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47 Lane, *Landscapes*, 59, emphasis added.
48 Rhoads, “Performance Criticism,” 122.
information. The desacralization of texts comes much later in history and is related to the documentary impulse of Western civilization. These two realities—the documentary impulse and the resultant desacralization of texts—makes it difficult for modern, western people to comprehend and appreciate the role texts had in the life of ancient Israel.

Israel’s texts were sacred objects. In some ways, Israel’s relationship to scrolls was similar to a modern American’s relationship to the Bill of Rights or the Constitution. Israel’s documents, like the Ten Commandments, were kept in a special box and stored in a special building. People would not come to read the documents, but rather to celebrate the values the documents represented. According to William Schniedewind, “Writing had a numinous power . . . [It] was not used, at first, to canonize religious praxis, but to engender religious awe.”

The values these documents espoused were embodied in the lives of the people, and gave their world purpose and coherence.

Not only were the values espoused by the documents embodied in the lives of the people, but the contents of the documents were held in the hearts of the people. In Western culture, essential knowledge is contained either physically in books or digitally on a computer or the Internet. For the people of Israel, the Bible—which contains the most essential of all knowledge—was not a book held in the hand, but a memory held in the heart. Jon Levenson catches 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.”

49 Schniedewind, How the Bible Became a Book, 24.
51 Boogaart, “Steeping Ourselves.”
A primary function this communal memory served in the life of the people of Israel was to mediate the presence of their ancestors. This was not an end in itself, however. The people of Israel understood themselves not as isolated individuals, but as the receivers of a tradition and partakers of a lineage that was central to their self-understanding. Their identity was bound to their past, as was their future. Filial piety was an essential component of daily life. It provided a sense of stability and rootedness, but also a sense of purpose and significance. Remembering their ancestors was a “pilgrimage,” a sacred journey leading them to the presence of God and to the blessing God had given to their ancestors. Their memory was their lifeline to God. The stories were sacramental.

In light of this, the biblical narratives, as they come to us today, may be conceived of as the compilation of Israel’s attempts to uphold the fifth Commandment, “Honor your father and mother (ancestors), so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Exod 20:12).\textsuperscript{53} Through the performance of their ancestral stories, the ancestors were made manifest among them again, and Israel shared in the original blessing given to the ancestors by God himself.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 12:1-3)

So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, \textit{and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God} . . . Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, \textit{yet the LORD set his heart in love}

\textsuperscript{53} I owe this insight to Dr. Tom Boogaart.
on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. (Deut 10:12-15, emphasis added)

The ritual retelling of the ancestors’ stories was a powerful way to access God’s blessing anew, and to reinforce the community’s commitment to love and worship YHVH, which would secure his blessing for future generations.

What I am here suggesting is by no means ancestor worship. Rather, I am suggesting that Israel took with the utmost seriousness their responsibility to honor and remember their ancestors, which was a sacred and deeply spiritual practice. To honor and remember the ancestors was ultimately to love and worship YHVH as the one who called the ancestors by name, chose them, and blessed them. Through their remembrance of the ancestors, the remembering community was reminded of God’s character, their own character, and what needed to be done in order to honor and please this God who called them his own.

**Orality and the Genre of the Biblical Narratives**

There is a relationship between the orality of the historical context that birthed the narratives, and the resultant narrative literature that fills the pages of the Hebrew Bible. To return to Sternberg’s categories, an oral source yields an orally-influenced discourse. Walter Ong suggests that we tend to derive our concept of oral performance from what we know of literature, “despite the fact that in actuality it is literature which grows out of oral performance.”

The resultant literature, affected as it is by its oral past, is connected to that past by an “oral residue,” latent in the text. Ong defines this residue as the “habits

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54 Ong, Presence, 21.
of thought and expression . . . deriving from the dominance of the oral as a medium in a
given culture.”55 These habits of thought and expression, when located, serve as signposts
along the trail tracing back to the oral history of the Hebrew Bible.

Terry Giles and William Doan suggest that a number of such clues exist in the
Hebrew Bible. Some of the clues they discern are “the language of immediacy, dialogue,
spontaneity, and ‘face-to-face’ constructions that employ a denser number of verbs when
compared to more distant and formal linguistic characteristics common in literary
texts.”56 Another clue, not often discussed, is the consistent presence of the classic
dramatic structure in every biblical narrative.

Dramatic structure is a way of describing the process a story takes to move from its
introduction to its conclusion, from its beginning to its ending. There are five movements
to the classic dramatic structure: introduction, conflict, conflict development, climax,
dénouement. Every biblical story hinges on a conflict, and the conflict is always
theological in nature. The conflict is developed by means of action and dialogue.
Eventually the conflict comes to a head and reaches its climax. In the climactic moment,
when the tension is finally released, one of the characters has changed. This change
embodies the narrative’s incipient theology. The change is a move from ignorance to
knowledge, from blindness to sight, from bondage to freedom. It can move in the
opposite direction as well, from freedom to bondage, from understanding to mystery,
from health to sickness. The direction the revelation moves (sickness to health or health

55 Walter Ong, quoted by Vincent Casaregola, from “Orality, Literacy, and Dialogue,” in *Time, Memory, and the
Verbal Arts: Essays on the Thought of Walter Ong*, eds Dennis L. Weeks and Jane Hoogestraat, (Selinsgrove:
56 Terry Giles and William Doan, “Performance Criticism of the Hebrew Bible,” *Religion Compass* 2/3, (2008), 273-
286.
to sickness) is suggestive of the theological affirmation the story is making. After the climax, and in typical dramatic fashion, the dénouement is terse, and the drama ends.

Every biblical narrative, then, has a beginning, middle, and end. Knowing where one narrative ends and another begins is a basic, yet crucial step in the interpretive process. Many of the narratives have very clear beginnings and endings; some are longer, more complex stories that may have multiple “acts,” each with its own distinct character and theme, yet fitting into a larger narrative system and overarching theological purpose. Some stories may have more than one potential ending point. Consideration of each potential ending may offer different insights into the conflict in the story, its resolution, and what was learned along the way.

Source-oriented analysis reveals that Israel was an oral culture. Theirs was a community bound by the spoken word. Their identity was sustained through their ritual and worship life, which manifested their beloved ancestors’ presence among them by communal remembrance through the performance of their stories. Discourse-analysis reveals that each of these stories share one very important thing in common: dramatic structure. Each story revolves around a particular conflict and works out a theology through the development and resolution of that tension. Therefore, I propose that the best label for the genre of the biblical narratives is neither historiography nor prose fiction, but rather drama. The scripts collected in the pages of Scripture are ancient plays, dramatic remembrances of a sacred past.
Oral Text, Oral Approach

The word *performance* has a broad range of contemporary meanings. It can be used to describe an act of presenting some form of entertainment to an audience, a particular person’s rendering of a dramatic role, a song, or music; the process of carrying out a task; and even the capacity of a vehicle to accelerate quickly and maintain control at high speeds. For many people, the word is associated with rock stars or televangelists who seem more concerned with drawing attention (and money) to themselves than to pointing to any Reality beyond themselves. The way that I am using *performance* reaches back into the history of the word to its original usage. Etymologically, “performance” is borrowed from Old French, and is the composite of *par*, “thoroughly,” and *fournir*, “to furnish.” Victor Turner suggests that to “thoroughly furnish” is not necessarily suggesting “the structuralist implication of manifesting form, but the processual sense of ‘bringing to completion’ or ‘accomplishing’.”57 Performance speaks to the process whereby some latent reality is manifested before an audience through the bodies, movements, voices, and silences of performers.

A written text is, by itself, dead; it has no life of its own. It is little more than leather-bound ink on wood pulp. A text’s only hope is to be sparked by the imagination of a reader, actualized by their body and voice, and through that be brought back to some sort of life, vitality and power. In a culture suffused with words and pressed for time, imagination wanes and is replaced with more productive—or at least immediately gratifying—practices. Performance can help recover a sense of the imagination by giving

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the biblical texts bodies, voices, movement, pacing, facial expressions. In short, performance enables a written text to become “living and active.”

Max Harris has said, “Dramatic texts”—the Old Testament narratives included—“are incomplete works of art.” These texts do not claim to be alive in and of themselves, but rather invite performers to “complete,” or “furnish” them with their bodies, voices and faces—all of which are necessary components to the performance of a script. Because of this, it is somewhat misleading to label ancient cultures as simply “oral.” “It is not as if the performer is a disembodied voice that expressed only sound,” argues David Rhoads. The label “oral” falls short of fully articulating the embodied reality of the ancient ethos. Performance necessarily involves more than simply a voice. In a performance, a text is *incarnated* in the midst of a gathered community.

In this way, performance mirrors a fundamental theological affirmation of the Christian faith. “The proclamation that ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1:14) suggests that speech became spectacle.” Performance enables an experience of the text that is closer to that of its original audience than reading or preaching can boast. The argument could be made that performance, as an inherently incarnational medium, also has the potential to reveal the very *character* of the text itself, which came to its fullest expression when “the Word became flesh.”

Peter Brook, a director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, author, and co-founder of the International Centre for Theatre Research in Paris, though not a Christian

58 Hebrews 4.12.  
59 Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1.  
61 Harris, *Theater*, 1.
himself, has nevertheless come to a similar conclusion. In his important work *The Empty Space*, Brook discusses the theatre in four ways: deadly, holy, rough, and immediate. His discussion of the holy theatre parallels the present argument. When the theatre is holy, suggests Brook, it is the theatre of the “Invisible—Made—Visible.”

The holy theatre manifests the invisible reality that is always present but rarely seen. “A holy theatre not only presents the invisible but also offers conditions that make its perception possible.” The holy theatre not only reveals, it also transforms. Black marks on white paper are transformed into a living, breathing, walking, and talking reality on stage. The blank stage is transformed into an ancient battlefield, Pharaoh’s court in Egypt, or Abraham’s tents near the oaks of Mamre. The world, latent in the script, is transformed into a real place in time before the gathered audience. The theatre is uniquely able to incarnate this reality. When the *script* of Scripture moves “from the page to the stage,” something extraordinary takes place; something Invisible is made Visible before our very eyes, unleashing a power, the character of which is fundamentally transformational.

In a fascinating chapter in *The Theatrical Event*, David Cole compares the role of the actor (performer) with the role of a shaman and a hungan in contemporary oral and animistic societies. In either case, their object is to make visible the invisible reality of the *illud tempus*, the “time of origins.” The *illud tempus* is the time before time when time itself began, and reality as we know it was created. In a broader sense, it is sacred time, the time that is always and everywhere present to God. Biblically speaking, it is the

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63 Brook, *Empty Space*, 56.
64 Hungan is the Haitian term for the priest of a possession cult. Cole uses it as “a person of any nationality who seeks possession as a blessed state of nearness to the gods.”
'in the beginning' of Genesis, the Garden of Eden, the call of Abram, the parting of the Red Sea; it is the sacred history in which the ancestors lived and experienced God’s presence and power. As Cole describes it, the shaman is the ‘cosmic voyager’ whose responsibility is to lead the community on an ascent from its own world to the illud tempus. The hungan, on the other hand, enables the descent of illud tempus personages into the midst of the gathered congregation. Both the shaman’s and the hungan’s bodies and voices are the vehicles through which the ascent or descent takes place, and each of them manifests the sought after reality through traditionally dramatic means: speaking, dancing, silence, clapping, movement, props, lighting, etc. The role of the shaman and hungan is not unlike the prophets of Israel who ascended into the presence of the Lord in the divine council on the people’s behalf, speaking their words to God, and then descended to speak God’s life-giving words to the people.

Cole suggests that the illud tempus is to the shaman or hungan as the script is to the actor or performer. Within the script lies an entire world of people, emotions, truths, lies, courage, relationships, power, sorrow. Further, when this script is understood to be Scripture, the world contained is a sacred past. Mircea Eliade suggests, “Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, ‘in the beginning.’” If the script is never performed, is never...

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66 I am not here suggesting that biblical history is “mythic,” in the sense that it did not take place in real human history. As I argued in my first chapter, to remove the personages of the Bible (God himself being the preeminent person) from real human history would have the most disastrous results. Rather, I am attempting to describe the ancient concept of time, which is significantly different from contemporary western notions of time. The Hebrew understanding of time, as I see it, is rooted in the fact that all time is present to God, and therefore accessible when in God’s presence. A performance (representation) was a means of accessing God’s presence, and therefore becoming contemporary with the sacred event being remembered through the performance.


“reactualized,” this sacred past remains dormant, silent, inaccessible. But, if the script is brought to life by an actor or a group of actors, the world of the script is incarnated in and through their performance, and the gathered audience is invited to experience it, consider it, and be transformed by it. It is the same way with music. Mozart composed many beautiful sonatas. If the score is simply studied and read, it will remain dead. But if the piece is given life and voice through a symphony of instruments, the sonata can “speak” of the beauty, majesty, and mystery of human existence as it was written to do. If this does not happen, it cannot speak at all. So it is with the script of Scripture. Until it is given both body and voice, it cannot reach its fullest expression.

A question remains. What exactly is it that is “made visible” through the performance of the biblical narratives. As I understand it, it is essentially a YHVH-centric understanding of reality. “The Bible points to a way of understanding the world from the point of view of God,” said Abraham Joshua Heschel. The people of Israel believed that the world was infused with the glory and presence of God. The psalmist exclaimed, “The earth, O LORD, is full of your steadfast love.” The seraphim sing in Isaiah 6, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts, heaven and earth are full of His glory!” The narratives assume this worldview. The dramas are attempts to plumb the depths of what it means that God is present and active in the world. How is God present? Where is God active? What is required of me in light of that? These questions and Israel’s attempts at answers are enlivened in dramatic form through the lives of Joseph, Esther, Moses and Jonah. It could be said that the narratives dramatize the location where heaven and earth

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70 Psalm 119.64.
meet, the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes of life in a world infused with the presence and glory of God.

Israel’s attempts to articulate these truths not only assume a YHVH-centric worldview, but divine revelation as well. YHVH had revealed Himself to Israel throughout their past, and by His Spirit guided their reflections on those seminal events and persons. The Scriptures as a whole come to us as a collection of a wide variety of literature, passed down and eventually written by human hands, that nevertheless bears the stamp of God’s Word. As C.S. Lewis said,

There are prophets who write with the clearest awareness that Divine compulsion is upon them. There are chroniclers whose intention may have been merely to record . . . There is the work first of the Jewish and then of the Christian Church in preserving and canonizing just these books . . . On all of these I suppose a Divine pressure; of which not by any means all need have been conscious.  

YHVH was involved in the lives of the people of Israel, revealing Himself to them through their experiences and through their reflections on their history. The Spirit of God was involved guiding Israel’s reflections and inspiring their conclusions about YHVH’s character and presence in the world. And the Spirit of God likewise guided the process over the centuries from the time of Israel through the canonization process of the early church, up to the present time.

However, the way modern western culture encounters the world is very different from the way the Israelites encountered it three thousand years ago. Therefore, performing these dramas in the twenty-first century is a radically cross-cultural experience. Their relationship to time, their cosmology, their means of communication, their respect for their ancestors, were all YHVH-centric and therefore influenced what

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they saw when they looked at the world. The stories they told are marked by that perspective. They did not perform these dramas to delight or to entertain, nor do these dramas allege to be one of any number of possible descriptions of reality. Erich Auerbach, comparing the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 with Homer’s *Odyssey*, asserts that the religious intent behind the telling and performing of biblical dramas involved “an absolute claim to historical truth” that was not only more urgent than Homer’s, but was tyrannical, excluding all other claims. Further, “the Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.”

A performance of the Scriptures is an invitation to step outside of the culture that has formed us, and to experience the world from a different perspective so that our perspective is transformed through the encounter. It is an invitation to “read” the text from inside the text’s world, rather than from a position external to it. On this point Lesslie Newbigin suggests the important thing to be kept in mind when reading Scripture “is not to understand the text but to understand the world *through* the text.” He then offers this critique:

> It is possible to undertake the most exhaustive and penetrating examination of the biblical text in a way which leaves one, so to say, outside it. The text is an object for examination, dissection, analysis, and interpretation from the standpoint of the scholar. This standpoint is normally that of the plausibility structure [worldview] which reigns in her society. From this point of view she examines the text, but the text does not examine her. Of course that can happen, as it did for Karl Barth as he sat under his apple tree in Safenwil, when he discovered to his astonishment that the apostle Paul was not only addressing his contemporaries in Rome but was actually addressing Karl Barth, and that an answer was required. But most biblical

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72 This is not his word.
study as currently conducted is protected from that interruption. The text is examined, so to say, from the outside.  

Performance offers a corrective against this tendency, embodying a hermeneutic of consent, inviting the text to examine me, rather than I alone examining it. Hans Urs von Balthasar put it this way: “The thought that here something is being acted out for me awakens the deeper realization that everything that has taken place is ‘for me’; it happened on my account and so ultimately has a claim on me.” This “realization” is the “invitation” to transformation that performance makes possible.

In performance, the text becomes living and active; in performance people experience the invisible made visible; in performance people experience the sacred, the presence of God. All of this implies a view of Scripture that is harmonious with the tradition of which I am a part. John Calvin, the sixteenth century French Reformer taught that the authority of Scripture was related to the work of the Holy Spirit. He wrote that, “The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in people’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.” Calvin describes an intensely personal relationship between the Scriptures, the Spirit, and the human heart. The Spirit is the power and vitality that catalyzes the relationship between the other two, bringing the Scriptures to life and the human heart to wholeness and worship. It is the presence and work of the Spirit in and through a performance of Scripture that manifests

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the truth of Scripture and enables an individual or a congregation to be transformed through the encounter.

**Hospitality of the Heart**

Performance criticism is undergirded by a particular methodology, which has two basic movements. The first step in the process is simply memorizing the drama. Before a biblical drama can be performed it must be internalized by the performer. To memorize in preparation for a performance is not to, as it were, simply write the words on the back of one’s eyes. To do this renders the recital of the words into merely an exercise in reading the words off the back of the eyes. This reduces the act of memorization to a *visual* exercise that maintains objectivity between reader and text. True memorization involves writing the words on the heart. To memorize is to internalize the words to the degree that they become a part of you. In the great *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6, Moses told the Israelites that the way for them to love the Lord their God with all the heart, soul and strength was to “let these words that I am commanding you today be *on your hearts*.” This is subjective engagement, where the script becomes another subject with whom you have a relationship characterized by love and intimacy. This type of memorization—learning “by heart”—could be called “hospitality of the heart.”

Consider the process of meeting and making a new friend. To be sure, this process will be different and more or less difficult for each new friend you make, but one could

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77 Thomas Boogaart, (unpublished data). This concept is used as a guiding principle in developing a new curriculum for teaching Biblical Hebrew and offering it as a course in spiritual formation.

78 The *words* can be either the original Hebrew or a translation. If a translation is to be used, it should be made by the group or individual performer so that it incorporates the insights found throughout the process. I prefer to use the Hebrew text as it enables direct access to the story in the very form it comes to us. Memorizing the text in the original language drastically minimizes the danger of certain words or movements being “lost in translation.” I will say more about how doing this in Hebrew implicates the actual performance below.
imagine the process looking something like this. At first the two of you are strangers to each other, bound together by nothing more than mutual humanity. However, after interacting together, the face of the other becomes familiar, the sound of their voice is no longer foreign. Fifteen minutes earlier this person was a statistic: one out of some 6 billion people on the planet. Now they are a human being. They have a past, have hopes and dreams, and are connected to hundreds of other people through various webs of relationships that now you have become a part of. You learn their name, where they grew up, how many people are in their family, and what they do for a living. Over time you continue to see this person and get to know them better. Eventually, you invite them to your home.

Hospitality is a sacred activity. To prepare for their arrival you follow a set of rituals. You clean your house, plan the meal, purchase the food, prepare the food, set the table, light the candles. You prepare a place for them. When they arrive they are overcome by your preparations. You show them your house, and you all sit to eat the prepared meal. Over the meal you talk, you laugh, you cry, there is silence. Eventually your friend looks at the clock, and it is far too late—they must be going. Two hours later you usher them out the door and bid them goodnight. When you close the door behind them, you turn around and see your kitchen—now empty save the empty artifacts of the evening’s meal. Surveying the scene you realize what just took place. Hours went by as if time did not exist. You can’t remember anything specific about the time, yet each moment seems to be etched in your memory like a snapshot. You have made a new
friend. And though their gratitude was unending throughout the evening, you know deep in your soul that you were the one who received the greatest blessing.

It is the same way with Scripture. At first, the passage to be memorized is unfamiliar—ink on wood pulp. However, as you welcome the words into your heart—visualizing them in your mind, training your mouth to speak those words in that succession, teaching your body to move with the movements of the passage, even as you discover them—the more familiar they become. Soon the words that were formerly nothing more than marks on a page begin to speak into your life. As you go about your daily activities, the words come to you at surprising moments. You find yourself rehearsing them in a moment of anxiety and they speak comfort; in a moment of self-righteousness, they speak rebuke. The words urge you to discover more about the historical and literary context in which they come to you. Research aids and enhances the work of internalizing the words, but cannot replace it. As the words speak truth into your life, you realize you are no longer exerting mastery over the words, controlling or manipulating them. The words have taken on a life of their own inside your heart and are now exerting their own power and influence on you. The words you have written on your heart change your life. When they do this they are like a seed that, when planted, grows into a fruit tree beneath whose branches you and others can find shelter, shade, and sustenance. The words of Scripture, when planted in the heart, grow into blessings not only for you, but also for others.

It should be noted here that, in the same way that not every person you meet will become a friend in the way I described above, not every biblical passage will be easy to
befriend either. In fact, some passages—like some people—become more and more
difficult to sit with the more you get to know them. This, too, is part of the blessing of the
Word of God. Just as friends who know you well can speak truth—painful truth—into the
most intimate parts of your life, and this truth is difficult to bear, so too can Scripture
speak difficult and painful truth into your life that is not easy to bear. The fruit of this
encounter, though neither fun nor enjoyable, is ultimately the same as the encounter
described above: a blessing that changes you deep into your soul.

The second step is preparing for the performance. Memorizing the text is
essential, but it is a means to an end. We get the story inside of us in order to get
ourselves inside the story. Literally. The words, once written on the heart, pulse through
the entire body. Faces, hands and feet are all implicated by the words, and must be used
to bring the drama to life. Several considerations must be made. An early decision to be
made is the type of theater to be used. In my experience, a “minimalist” approach works
best as it uses few, if any props, and does not attempt to visually recreate the biblical
world through costumes and sets. Not only is that an expensive endeavor, but it must be
done exceedingly well to not be distracting. The minimalist approach invites the audience
to use its imagination by incorporating a mixture of iconic freezes with animated
dialogue. Another benefit is that one need not be a professionally trained actor to perform
the stories. Acting abilities certainly enhance the performance, but it is truly something
that anyone with curiosity, a theological imagination, and a willingness to surrender to
the story can do.
If the performance is being done by a group of individuals, the parts need to be divided accordingly. As was the case during the time of Shakespeare, one person may play multiple roles, so long as their switch from one role to another does not confuse the audience. The stories can be performed by a single individual, but in my experience working with a group is not only more gratifying, but also produces a much more creative and faithful interpretation as iron sharpens iron in the exegetical process.

Issues of space are also significant. The people in these stories take up space, and the spatial relationship between characters is often central to the drama’s tension, and therefore to its theology. For example, the tension in the story of David and Saul in the cave at En Gedi in I Samuel 24 revolves around the use of space, and around the irony of David and Saul’s proximity to each other as Saul meets David unawares at the former’s most vulnerable and solitary moment. Often, the spacing is implied, but many times it is explicitly stated by the narrator.

In addition to spacing, gestures and movements are of utmost importance. These are often so subtle that whether they are explicitly described in the text or not, the reader is bound to miss them—or at least miss their significance. However, when staged, the movements become central to the telling of the story. In the story of David and Goliath, for example, the central theme of the story is manifested in a dramatic gesture near the end of the story. Goliath has taunted the armies of Israel, declaring that the Philistines will serve Israel, if only a man might come out and defeat him—but if that man loses, Israel will serve the Philistines. At the climax of the story, when David’s stone strikes Goliath in the head, one would expect the giant to fall backwards from the blow.
However, the narrator says that Goliath fell “face down on the ground.” This is significant because he has just assumed a posture of subservience, embodying in his death the service he promised to Israel, should a man be found who could kill him. If the drama of 1 Samuel 17 is not seen, it is likely to be missed.

Therefore, the tension driving the plot must be discerned, along with how it is introduced, developed and resolved. Careful attention to every detail along the way contributes to a faithful performance. Through this process, the drama’s theme(s) rise to the fore, and can be worked into the character of the performance so that every aspect—from tone of voice, to the pacing of the dialogue, to the blocking of characters onstage—serves the purpose of manifesting the truth found in the script.

Every decision made along the way has theological and exegetical implications. This is both a spiritual and an academic endeavor. Take the story of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, for instance. I have performed this story many times, and have seen it performed by others several times as well. God is a character in this drama. God speaks. God carries on a conversation with Abraham. In a performance of this story, God must be portrayed somehow. God must not only be portrayed, but also given a voice and a body. Where does God stand when God speaks to Abraham? Is God off-stage and a disembodied voice breaks the silence? Does God come near, touch Abraham, and speak to him tenderly? Is God forceful? Ambivalent? Loving? Manipulative? Is God played by a man or a woman, or three individuals working together of various genders, ages, and ethnicities? All of these questions are ultimately theological in nature. “Who is God?” is the ultimate question the biblical dramas are trying to find answers to. Likewise, it is
toward an answer to this question that God endeavors to reveal God’s self to the biblical
storytellers. Therefore, the way God is presented and delivers the line in a performance
communicates volumes about who the performer understands God to be.

**Israel’s Dramatic Tradition**

Israel’s dramatic tradition has long been overlooked by historians and thespians alike. Gordon C. Bennett offers the typical conclusion of theater historians:

> Unlike the Egyptians and Greeks and some early Eastern civilizations, the Hebrews made little use of drama. Indeed, they dabbled very little in art since they were forbidden by Exodus 20:4 to make “any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

Bennett’s conclusion is simply not true. A “likeness” was an idol before which a person would bow down in worship. The divine ban on such images was certainly not a ban on all forms of art. In God’s instructions to Moses for the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus 35-36, the work of Oholiab and Bezalel was central. Exodus 35:30-35 reads,

> And Moses said to the Israelites: See, the Lord has singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. He has endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft and has inspired him to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper . . . He and Oholiab son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan have been endowed with the skill to do any work—of the carver, the designer, the embroiderer . . . ” (JPS, emphasis added).

God calls Bezalel and Oholiab by name. For God to call someone by name in Scripture is significant. Here Bezalel and Oholiab join ranks with the likes of Abraham (Gen 22:2), Moses (Exod 3:4), and Samuel (1Sam 3:4), among others. Not only does God call Bezalel and Oholiab by name, God also prepares them and sets them apart for a specific

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task by filling them with the *ruach elohim*, the divine spirit—the same Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation in Genesis 1. Here God uses priestly language to describe a sacred calling.

Bezalel and Oholiab were not the only artists in Israel; they were set in leadership over many craftsmen. Israel had a rich artistic tradition. We might conceive the Hebrew playwrights seeing themselves as serving a similar function: building a Tabernacle in time out of the memories of Israel’s sacred past. The prohibition of “likenesses” did not represent a prohibition of the arts, nor of the dramatic arts. The Hebrews also had a rich dramatic tradition.

This tradition, forged in the smoldering coals of Israel’s sacred past, enlivened and passed down by a long train of performers, was eventually committed to writing and canonized into the Hebrew Bible. The received text bears the marks of its oral and performative past. The classic dramatic structure gives shape and form to every narrative. Dialogue—not quoted speech—peppers each story and moves the plot along by articulating the tensions and suggesting the movements. The narrator, like a prophet, mediates between the world being incarnated on stage and the gathered audience, ushering them into the presence of the divine. All this happens as a way to manifest the truth of Israel’s past, the presence and purpose of her God in the world, and to access the blessings God gave to the beloved ancestors by re-presenting their stories.

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80 This phrase is an adaptation of a wonderful phrase by Abraham Joshua Heschel in which he describes the Sabbath as a “palace in time,” in *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1951), 15.
In this and the previous chapter I have been telling more than showing. In the chapter that remains, I will attempt the opposite: show rather than tell. Drawing from my experiences over the last three years of applying the methodology explained here to various narratives from the Hebrew Bible, I will offer a dramatic analysis of the book of Jonah. Jonah was the first story our group memorized and performed, and our decision to perform it was largely arbitrary. It fulfilled the requirements we had at the time and was a story we were all generally familiar with in Hebrew already, so it seemed a good choice to start with. Due to its random selection, my comments will highlight how Jonah—and by extension, every biblical narrative—touches on the most fundamental aspects of daily life in a world filled with the glory of God, yet marred by sin. Issues related to the presence and power of God, the character of God’s relentless love, God’s endless capacity to forgive, and the way God uses power to mitigate violence will all be touched on, and much more.

At some level it is ironic that the comments I will offer in the next chapter will come in written form. Ultimately, the generative power of these stories must be seen to be fully appreciated. Inevitably a written description of a living moment in time—a performance—will fall short of capturing the depth and breadth of the experience. But what I will do here is explicate the decision-making process that I and the other students went through as we explored the range of dramatic possibilities held in each drama through our “physical exegesis,” or, as Max Harris calls it, “theatrical hermeneutics.”82 I will explain the movements we saw when we memorized the drama, and the theological significance of each, and will invite the reader to visualize and imagine the movements as

82 Harris, Theater, 12-14.
I describe them. To the best of your ability, complete the circle by taking the words bound to these pages that represent moments lived in space and time, and bring them back to life in your imagination, so that you don’t just read my words about the story, but actually see the story as I describe it. It is to this that I now turn.
Chapter 3
Dramatic Analysis of Jonah

Introduction

The biblical narratives are dramatic. In this chapter, therefore, I will provide a dramatic analysis of Jonah. Conflict, irony, blocking, and narration are the component parts of any performance and careful analysis of each part will reveal the dramatic nature of the whole. This chapter will demonstrate how performance criticism reaches down to the deep stores of theology contained in the book of Jonah, which seems to be more often seen as a mere children’s story than a profound drama exploring the character of God and God’s ways in the world.

I have chosen Jonah because it was the first story that I memorized and performed, and has been seminal in shaping my understanding of the methodology of performance criticism. Further, it is an excellent example of the dramatic nature of the biblical narratives, and of the potency of performance criticism to unlock the deeper meanings behind the closed doors of these ancient scripts.

I will direct the majority of my comments to chapter one. It is the location where all of the book’s themes are introduced, and it forms a complete “act” in the drama, having a clear beginning, middle, and end. I have included a new translation of Jonah 1 developed specifically for performance as Appendix A. This translation maintains a very close tie to the original Hebrew idioms and word order, and accents the physical dimensions of the drama that are present in Hebrew, but are often lost in English translations of the Bible. Further, the translation has been arranged in such a way as to
highlight its inherent dramatic structure, divided into three sections: Conflict, Development, Resolution. The dialogue appears indented in *italics* and narration is in roman script. All quotations from Jonah 1 included here will be drawn from this translation.

In addition, at certain points, I will direct the reader to stage directions for particular scenes that will serve as aids to visualizing the spatial dimensions of the text so crucial to a performance. Stage directions are the key to unlocking the drama’s deeper meanings. These are collected in Appendix B.

**Setting the Stage**

As Max Harris reminded us, the text (script) of Jonah found in Scripture is an “incomplete work of art.”[^83] Charles Waxberg puts a finer point on it: “Until a script is married with the artistic contributions of actor, designer, technician, director, and—finally—audience, it is unfinished.”[^84] A script, then, is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. It is a world that exists in abstract form, but comes to life in the places and through the people that perform it. Therefore, the performance is the moment, the location in space and time where the script is finally brought to completion, actualized. The completeness is fleeting, however, for a performance begins and ends. Further, each performance is particular to the audience for whom it is performed. But in the moment created between actors and audience—the performance—the script reaches its fullest potential for life and vitality.

[^83]: Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1.
Three themes dominate the theological imagination of the composer\textsuperscript{85} of the book of Jonah: the particularity and ubiquity of God, the sovereignty of God, and the compassion of God. Each of these themes is worked out through dialogue, physical gestures, and the layout of the stage. Figure 1 (Appendix B) shows this basic layout.

Nineveh is located upstage center. At the bottom of the stairs is the port in Jaffa where Jonah finds the boat heading for Tarshish. Beneath that, located downstage center, is the boat after it leaves the dock and encounters the storm at sea, which extends throughout the audience. Tarshish is, by implication, located somewhere in the parking lot behind the performance space!

In Jonah, God is both particular and ubiquitous. The key to discerning God’s particular location in the drama is the repetition of variations on the Hebrew phrase lifne, which literally means “to the face.” In God’s opening speech He tells Jonah that the evil of Nineveh has risen “to my face” (lefanai). The composer suggests that God was in Nineveh, because God’s face was immediately above the city. In terms of blocking the stage, to locate God in Nineveh sets up a basic spatial framework within which the entire drama is set. For instance, when Jonah flees to Tarshish, “away from the face of the Lord” (milifne YHVH), he is simultaneously running away from Nineveh. This creates a clear horizontal axis on stage: Nineveh $\rightarrow$ Jaffa $\rightarrow$ Tarshish. God is not only in Nineveh, however; God is present at every point along the horizontal axis. God is in Nineveh, and God “hurls” the storm onto the sea. Through the spatial dimensions in the script, it

\textsuperscript{85} I am employing this term to designate the individual or group who received the oral tradition and eventually committed the stories to writing and therefore had the “final say” on the exact sequence of events in the drama, and who said what, when. The composer, as the “author” is distinct from the Narrator, who is a character in the drama. In terms of the performance, the Narrator is like a prophet; in terms of the script, the composer is like a playwright.
becomes clear that God is in Nineveh (particular) because God is everywhere (ubiquitous).

The second theme introduced in the drama, intimately related to the first, is the sovereignty of God. Just as God is everywhere, God holds sway over everyplace and everything. God is depicted as the all-powerful God who is in control of all of creation—the sea, the storm wind, the fish, the plant (qiqayon), and even the lowly worm.

In the third place, the composer depicts God as being a God of compassion. By the end of chapter one we learn that the storm was not intended to destroy the ship or its crew, but to reveal the will of God and provide the sailors an opportunity for conversion. Further, the storm was not meant to destroy Jonah, but to offer him an opportunity for deeper reflection on his vocation and the value of retributive justice. And finally, God’s word to the Ninevites was not intended to destroy them, but to offer them an opportunity to repent of their evil and violent ways, and receive forgiveness.

**Dramatic Analysis**

**Conflict**

“In their hearts human beings plan their course, but the Lord directs their steps.”

This proverb summarizes the perspective of the ancient Hebrew playwrights. Also in view are God’s words to the Israelites through the prophet Isaiah: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your

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86 Proverbs 16.9.
thoughts.” Scripture teaches that humans are limited in their ability to see the future, to comprehend the present or the past, or to understand the nature of reality in a world created and sustained by an omnipresent, omnipotent, compassionate God. Only God has universal and complete understanding of both history and reality. Conflict necessarily rises in a world in which human’s cannot fathom God’s ways. Their lack of understanding leads to resistance to God “directing” their steps, and to the inversion of Isaiah’s framework, where humans conceive of their ways being above God’s. In all this conflict ensues.

Conflict is central to drama. It is the hinge upon which everything dramatic turns. But *dramatic* conflict is a peculiar brand of conflict. “It is not a general crash of one thing into another,” says David Ball. “It is a particular kind of interaction, deeply rooted in and inalienable from real-life human behavior.”* Ball suggests that what makes plays unique is that in a play, actors pretend to be people they are not. In order to do that, they must talk. “Talking is drama’s most common activity.” Further, it is the responsibility of the playwright to support the actor’s incarnation by reflecting recognizable human behavior in how the characters talk. This leads to the fundamental framework for *dramatic* conflict: “A human being talks in order to get what he or she wants.”* To this principle, Charles Waxberg adds, “There is no exception.” Conflict enters when an actor encounters resistance to having what she wants. This resistance is called an “obstacle.”

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87 Isaiah 55.8-9.
89 Ball, *Backwards & Forwards*, 27.
90 Waxberg, *Actor’s Script*, 33.
Put succinctly, “A play’s conflict is between what someone wants and what hinders what they want: the obstacle.”91

In biblical dramas, the conflict is always theological in character. It is always related to the presence and activity of God in the world, to God’s character and purposes in and for the world. In the context of David Ball’s framework, conflict in the biblical dramas is always either between God’s desires for the world and the human agents that stand in His way, or the desires that human agents have for the world and the character and presence of God that stands in their way. This suggests that the biblical narratives assume a complex and profound relationship between God and humanity. The Hebrew dramatists were endlessly curious about who God was and what God was doing in the world. They were also endlessly curious about the human condition, the presence and power of sin, and the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human agency. Again, “In their hearts human being plan their course, but the Lord directs their steps.”

In every drama a conflict is introduced, developed, and resolved, giving each drama a beginning, middle, and end. This conflict is created and developed by a series of actions—whether a physical action or the act of speech—which taken together form the plot. The conflict that is introduced changes the very fabric of reality as each character has come to understand and experience it. From the point at which the conflict is introduced, the plot unfolds and the stresses build and mount until they can no longer sustain greater pressure without exploding. The event through which the tension is finally released is the climax. The result of the climax is the reinstating of an equilibrium or balance which allows life to move forward again. Through the climax and resolution, the

91 Ball, Backwards & Forwards, 28.
characters move from ignorance to knowledge, from danger to safety, from the absence of God to the presence of God. It is possible to move in the opposite direction as well, from life to death, from health to sickness, from safety to danger, and from the presence of God to the absence of God.

In the book of Jonah, the conflict centers on the compassionate presence of God in the world. Defined within Ball’s framework, God desires to mitigate violence by extending compassion to the world through the witness of Jonah, but Jonah rejects God’s compassion (obstacle) in favor of the violence of retribution. What will prevail? God’s compassion, or Jonah’s commitment to the violence of retributive justice? This is the question the book of Jonah engages.

God is presented as being at once particular and ubiquitous, the sovereign God who pursues relationship with His creation, and a God who uses power both to mitigate violence and to create opportunities for the Ninevites and for Jonah to change from their violent ways. Jonah, on the other hand, is presented as being ignorant of the significance of God’s presence in the world, ambivalent toward God’s power, and opposed to the compassion of God.

Jonah’s ignorance, ambivalence, and opposition complicate the unfolding drama by (a) creating numerous ironies, and (b) sharpening in general the depiction of God’s compassionate presence. According to this rubric, then, Jonah is not the main character of the book of Jonah. Rather, Jonah is a foil for the true protagonist: “the God of heaven

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92 In both literature and drama, a foil is a character that contrasts with another character (usually the protagonist) in such a way as to highlight the protagonist’s personality or character by throwing it into sharper relief. Jonah’s behavior throughout the book of Jonah is consistently contrasted, implicitly and explicitly, with God’s in order that God’s character might shine more clearly and brightly on account of the contrast.
who made the sea and the dry land” (Jon. 1.9). The main character of the book of Jonah is God.

**Irony in Jonah**

The most poignant and potent irony in the entire book comes in its opening lines: Jonah flees from the presence of an omnipresent God. God’s ubiquity is both assumed and implied at various points in the drama. The Narrator subtly and shrewdly reminds the audience of the folly of Jonah’s flight “away from the face of the Lord” (v. 3, 10). The transition between v. 3 and v. 4 marks a subtle yet profound affirmation of the ubiquity of God that follows on the heels of Jonah’s attempted escape. The final word in v. 3 and the first word in v. 4 are one and the same: YHVH, the proper name of the God of Israel. In order to do this, the composer had to reverse the typical Hebrew word order from verb-subject-object/complement to subject-verb-object/complement. The question follows: Why the reversal? Jack M. Sasson, in his Anchor Bible commentary on Jonah, suggests that this is merely a linguistic shift of focus “from activity to actor.” He points out that this type of construction “is more common to poetic or legalistic writing” and is encountered again in the long poem in chapter two. He states that its inclusion here “draws attention to matters of special significance,” though he does explicate the significance. 93 Sasson’s emphasis falls on the grammatical construction itself, not on the significance to which it points. Phyllis Trible comes closer to defining the shift’s

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theological purpose, suggesting, “Divine activity begins to erode the distance that Jonah sought to put between himself and YHWH.”

In performance, however, God’s particular location in Nineveh sets the stage not only for Jonah’s flight away from the face of the Lord, but also for a display of the essential counterpoint of God’s particularity: God’s ubiquity. As Jonah, aboard the ship bound for Tarshish, is fleeing from God along the horizontal axis, God musters the storm from His place in Nineveh. The narrator’s repetition of the Divine Name (v. 4) cues God’s activity (Figure 2). Armed with a long piece of dark gray sheer material (“the storm”), God runs down the stage, beyond the boat, and into the center aisle, holding the storm (fabric) above His head so that it flutters behind Him. After running partway down the center aisle of the auditorium God snaps the fabric, thereby “hurling” the storm into sea, and then returns to His place in Nineveh. This brief, yet powerful and unexpected action accents the theme of God’s particularity and universality. From the perspective of the audience, it is clear that, even as Jonah is fleeing from the face of the Lord, he is simultaneously running toward it. Just as YHVH is the last word in v. 3 and the first in v. 4, so God is the beginning and the end of Jonah’s journey. Whether or not Jonah comprehends the irony, it is clear to the audience that this is the intention of the Narrator’s subtle message.

A second irony relates to the vertical dimension of the drama: Jonah constantly wants to go down (yarad) and go to sleep, but an omnipresent and compassionate God continually comes to him, calling him to rise (qum) and fulfill his mission. Three times in chapter one the narrator tells us that Jonah “went down” (v. 3, 5) Three times Jonah is

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94 Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 131.
told to “get up” (1:2, 6, 3:2) In chapter two Jonah goes down again—into the heart of the sea. Three days later the great fish vomits him up.

The drama begins with the word of the Lord coming to Jonah (v. 2). His first word to Jonah is qum, “Get up!” The word qum is often used in Scripture for rising from sleep (Gen 24:54, Deut 6:6, 1Sam 3:6), as “sleep” and “rise” are natural antonyms. The implication being made is that Jonah begins the drama asleep. Further, and more to the point, Jonah is on a sleep quest throughout the entire drama. Every time Jonah is called (or thrown!) up, he is being called from sleep. Beginning the drama with Jonah asleep foreshadows his constant descent toward sleep throughout the entire drama, and provides a context for his ambivalence toward God, the sailors, and eventually the Ninevites.

Jonah, of course, responds to God’s call to “Get up!” by fleeing, and “going down.” In our performance we make use of the stairs separating the upper and lower stages by having Jonah actually take a step down every time the narrator describes his action with yarad. So, Jonah takes a step down to Jaffa (v. 3a), then takes another step down into the boat (v. 3b) and finally, once the storm hits the ship at sea (v. 5), Jonah resumes his original sleeping position at the start of the performance, laying down on the floor of the lower stage (Figure 3).

At this point the foreign captain, driven by the violent storm, comes to Jonah and echoes God’s initial Word to him: “get up!” This charge, too, comes in the midst of a deep sleep (nirdam). In fact, the captain gives voice to the question all in the audience (and likely God as well) are asking: “What is this, you’re sleeping?!?” Every time Jonah
descends to sleep, God comes to him—this time through a foreigner; wakes him from his slumber; and calls him to get up, calls him to action.

As if this weren’t enough, Jonah actually descends once more, this time into the “belly of She’ol” (2:2). At the end of chapter one the sailors finally agree to Jonah’s terms and throw him overboard, and to their amazement the storm instantly dies. The death of the storm above the water is symbolic of the death Jonah experiences beneath its surface. After being swallowed by the great fish (dag gadol), Jonah sinks deep into the sea. He cries out to God from the “belly of She’ol,” (mibbeten she’ol) and from the “pit” (mishakhat). The images Jonah employs are suggestive of the place of the dead—Jonah has found eternal sleep in this his deepest descent. But just as before, God is not content to let him rest long. After three days and nights God commands the fish to throw Jonah “up” onto the shore (2:10). Jonah has finally found the dry ground (yabbasha) the sailors strained at the oars to reach amidst the storm (1:13). And finally, in this place of exhaustion and relief, when Jonah’s first instinct would likely be to find a place to rest, God comes to him a second time: “Get up!”

A third and final irony presents Jonah as the unwilling means of conversion for the sailors and later for the Ninevites. In 4:2 Jonah finally confesses to God in prayer why he fled way back in 1:3: “O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still in my own land? Therefore I fled toward Tarshish; for I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you relent from punishing.” Jonah fled because he knew all along that God would not destroy Nineveh, and Jonah did not want to play a role in their mass conversion. He much preferred their mass
destruction. And so, in his attempt to avoid enabling an entire foreign nation to become YHVH-fearers like himself, he inadvertently becomes the means of a different band of foreigners coming to knowledge of YHVH. It was little more than Jonah’s presence on the boat that occasioned the sailors’ conversion. Jonah made no invitations to the sailors to believe, he refused to cry out to the Lord on their behalf, and would have been content to simply sleep through the storm until it destroyed the ship and they all died together. And yet, through the storm and the ensuing calm, God works even through Jonah’s unwillingness to make YHVH known to the sailors, and later to the Ninevites. In chapter three Jonah speaks no more than five words to the Ninevites, and likely does not even enter the city proper to speak them, yet the people believe. Eventually, in spite of Jonah’s lack of effort, the king learns of Jonah’s words, and the nation fasts and repents, receiving God’s acceptance.

*The Compassionate Presence of God*

Not only is God omnipresent in creation, but also omnipotent in all creation. God “hurls” the wind and controls the storm on the sea; God appoints the great fish, the plant, the worm, and the sultry east wind. God’s word establishes the pattern of Jonah’s life: get up; go; cry out. God’s word also establishes the patterns of creation. The book of Jonah depicts an awesome God—indeed, fear is a major theme in Jonah 1. But God is at the same time gentle, gracious, merciful and loving. God uses His power not to exact

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95 It is likely that the Nineveh that was a three-day walk refers not to the city proper (surrounded by city walls) but to the surrounding region, where farms and pastureland were kept, outside the city walls. According to this model, Jonah never reached the city of Nineveh, but instead preached to the shepherds and their sheep! That would explain why many people had already begun to fast by the time the word even reached the king, because Jonah did not preach in earshot of the king. Further, it adds some context to the humorous inclusion of the nation’s animals in the fast decreed by the king – they were the first to hear the news!
violence against His creation, but to give the characters in the drama time and space to become less violent and more compassionate.

In the first place, God’s word to Jonah is intended to create an opportunity for Nineveh to repent. Jonah is well aware of this fact (4:2) and refuses to cooperate. This is the linchpin of the conflict in the drama. The audience is unaware of Jonah’s reasons for fleeing after the initial word from the Lord; they simply have to wait and watch it unfold. As Erich Auerbach discovered, the dramas filling the pages of Scripture are “fraught with background.”

Obviously at some point over the course of his life Jonah has come to learn that with God, “mercy triumphs over judgment” (Jam 2:13). But the audience need not know that from the beginning, because the drama and suspense is greatly increased by the confusion over Jonah’s motivation. As a result, the revelation in chapter four becomes considerably more powerful than it would have been if it were placed where it belongs chronologically, in chapter one.

Meir Sternberg offers a fascinating analysis of the dramatic effect of Jonah’s confession in 4:2. He suggests that the expectation being set up by the narrator is that Jonah refuses to go to Nineveh because he is too gentle-hearted to speak words of condemnation to them. In this framework, Jonah becomes the good guy who offers himself as a living sacrifice to save the sailors and worships God from the belly of a great fish; God becomes the bad guy who will stop at nothing to get Jonah to proclaim gloom and doom on the city of sinners and Gentiles. But all of this is reversed in 4:1-3:

This series of informational thunderbolts shatters the entire model of the narrative world and world view, so that the reader cannot find it easy to get his bearings at

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once . . . Not that the plot and the participants are suddenly transformed, but that they are suddenly recognized for what they have always been; and if they look transformed, that is only because the narrator has passed in misleading silence over what the prophet actually said “when [he] was yet in [his] own country.”

Jonah’s refusal to obey God and the narrator’s silence concerning Jonah’s motivation for doing so work together to create a story fraught with tension and drama. And regardless of whether Jonah appears tender-hearted or rebellious from 1:3 on, it is clear by the curtain call that God is the “gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment” (4:2).

It is important to recognize precisely what God’s intention was for His word to Nineveh. God is not depicted as simply desiring to increase His fame throughout the world. Rather, God desires that His children—all people everywhere—stop killing each other. The king of Nineveh understands this well:

No person or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything . . . All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we will not perish (Jonah 3:7-9)

God’s word mitigates the violence of the Ninevites, inviting them to turn from the evil of their ways, and to live instead for peace.

In the second place, God uses the storm to invite Jonah to deeper reflection on the legitimacy of his actions, and the validity of his commitment to the violence of retributive justice. Throughout the drama Jonah shows by his actions that he stands in opposition to God’s word and God’s compassion. Jonah is consistent in his distaste for God’s mercy and love; he desires no part in spreading that to the world. Indeed, Jonah’s actions speak

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volumes in the drama, as he does not speak a word until v. 9, more than halfway through
the first chapter. And when he finally does speak, his words are laced with ambiguity,
inviting actor and audience alike to consider his motivation. For example, in v. 9 Jonah
speaks for the first time. He says, “I am a Hebrew and I fear the LORD, the God of
heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” The ultimate question in performing this
line is, however, how seriously can Jonah be taken here? The content of his confession
stands in stark contrast to the character of his actions. Is he being sarcastic or cynical? Is
he coming to a realization of the futility of his flight? Is he dispassionately rehearsing a
childhood creed? Is it some combination of each? In order to perform the line, the actor
must discern from the overall presentation of Jonah’s character in the drama, and the
particularities of this moment in context what Jonah actually means when he says this
line.

The formal construction of Jonah’s confession suggests that it may be an ancient
Israelite creed. Perhaps it would have been taught to children and recited liturgically in
Israelite worship. Jonah was likely very familiar with this creed, and he seems to offer it
almost as a knee-jerk reaction to the sailors barrage of questions (v. 8). Certainly the
setting would have called for less formal dialogue. “Jonah makes a confession of faith in
a noncultic setting to non-Yhwhistic sailors. He utters conventional speech in an
unconventional situation.”98 Yet at the same time it seems possible that this may have
been a moment of revelation for Jonah—however small and short lived it may have
been—of the magnitude and irony of his rebellion.

98 Trible, Rhetorical Criticism, 141.
In our performance, then, Jonah begins to respond to the sailors while still on the ground, having just woken up from his slumber (v. 5). As he dispassionately moves through the creed he has spoken a thousand times, the words begin to take on new significance for him in light of his present circumstances. The moment that becomes ripe with significance for Jonah comes with the affirmation of God as the One “who made the sea and the dry land.” This cosmic “God of heaven” made the sea—*which was roaring and raging against them*—as well as the dry land—*where everyone on the boat would much rather have been at that moment*. At this realization, the intensity in Jonah’s tone of voice and his facial expression change dramatically, which directly contributes to the sailors’ impassioned response (“and they feared a great fear”). It is not insignificant that the storm is called an “evil” (*ra’ah*) two times by the sailors. This is the same word used to describe the actions of the Ninevites (v. 2), the actions God repented from doing to Nineveh after their conversion (3:10), and the response Jonah had to the compassion God extended to the Ninevites (4:1). The storm, which the sailors describe as a “great evil” and Jonah attempted to escape through sleep, has touched something in Jonah. God uses it to invite him to reflect on the validity of the way he has chosen, and the violence in his heart. God is reminding Jonah that choosing the path of violence not only increases the possibility that violence may be done to him, but also implicates others who are innocent of violence themselves (1:14).

Thirdly, the storm—the “evil” that at first appears to be violent and life-threatening—brings about the sailors’ conversion. The sailors exhaust every possible means at their disposal to abate the storm—crying out to their gods (v. 5), sacrificing the
ship’s cargo to appease the sea god (v. 5), and futilely imploring Jonah to ask his god for help (v. 6). Having no success, they cast lots to allow the gods to determine “on whose account this great evil has come upon [them]” (v. 7). After Jonah is singled out and they learn of his disastrous mission fleeing from his all-powerful God, they ask him what they should do (v. 11). Uncomfortable with his reply, they attempt (again, futilely) to avoid the storm and return to land, but they cannot (v. 13). As the tension mounts and the sailors find themselves completely out of options, stuck as they are between the storm and a madman, they turn instead to YHVH in prayer. This is the climax of Jonah 1: the sailors’ conversion (v. 14-15). This is the first time the divine name YHVH is used by the sailors, and by the narrator to describe the object of the sailors’ actions; it is used five times in the final three verses. Through their prayer the sailors submit their future to the will of God and throw Jonah overboard. The miraculous calm transforms their growing fear into reverence, and they worship through sacrifice and vows. This conclusion reveals that God sent the storm not simply to stop Jonah’s flight and convince him to go to Nineveh, but God also sent the storm for them, not against them, as they had at first assumed.

**Blocking**

Charles Waxberg defines “theatricality” as “dramatic charisma.” He suggests it is the collective effect of “the elements that latch onto the audience’s attention and evoke their empathetic response in heart, mind, and/or body.” All art, no matter what sort, attempts to involve its audience and elicit a response. The means by which playwrights elicit the desired response is “theatrical actions . . . [P]ure theatricality communicates
through action.”

It is the same with the biblical dramas. Dialogue and narration are the explicit means for communicating the intricacies and nuances of the plot by giving voice to the various “sides” of the conflict. However, these voices are united to bodies that take up space on a stage. And it is these elements—bodies and stage—that work in tandem to render the drama’s latent “theatricality.”

The response the biblical dramas endeavor to elicit by employing theatricality is a theocentric vision of reality. I return, again, to Auerbach: “the Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.”

The same contrast can be made between the biblical dramas and modern plays. Much popular contemporary theatre, like Homer’s works, though certainly not void of meaning and purpose, often attempts more to enchant than to transform. This is due, in large part, to the economic necessity of making enough money to continue to put on shows. As Peter Brook has lamented, speaking about “deadly” theatre (which he defines as bad theatre), “In New York . . . the most deadly element is certainly economic.” All too often the need to get people to purchase tickets has sacrificed substance in favor of spectacle.

The biblical dramas, on the other hand, do not compromise. Their vision transcends economics. And though Scripture is certainly not without the spectacular, it serves the ultimate purpose of presenting God in His fullness to a world ignorant of His presence. Jonah, to be sure, has its fair share of spectacle, but the spectacle serves the story, not the other way around.

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100 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 11-12.
Direct Action

“Blocking” is a theater term that refers to the various movements and positions of actors on a stage that facilitate the performance of the script, making it come to life. In biblical dramas these movements and positions can be directly expressed through narration or a character’s speech. For instance, in Jonah, the Narrator reports, “Jonah went down into the bowels of the boat and he laid down and fell asleep” (v. 5). Here the Narrator directly reports on the specific actions of Jonah. However, there exist a host of potential gestures and movements that could present the manifold shades of character behind the Narrator’s comment. For example, is the Narrator being sarcastic here? The previous line reports the frantic efforts of the sailors to bring the sea back to rest, and a clear juxtaposition is made between their activity and his pursuit of rest at all costs. In a performance, the Narrator can accent the irony of Jonah’s actions and contribute to the development of the character of Jonah by saying his line with a hint of sarcasm while Jonah, with all seriousness, flees the action yet again.

The majority of direct action in Jonah takes place along the vertical and horizontal axes described above. Locating God in Nineveh (upstage center) is the clue to the spatial arrangement of every facet of the drama. God is “up” and Jaffa, the boat, and Tarshish are all “down.” God is located in one direction, and Tarshish in the exact opposite. God calls Jonah to come; Jonah flees. God calls Jonah to get up; Jonah goes down.

102 The Hebrew word halakh can mean both “go” and “come,” and is often translated “come” in 1.7 when the sailors suggest to each other casting lots as an alternative method of discerning the will of the gods. This suggests that God could just as easily have commanded Jonah to “come to Nineveh” as “go to Nineveh.”
Two fundamental theological affirmations, central to the book of Jonah, are rooted in the vertical and horizontal axes respectively. In the vertical axis, God is located at the highest position the stage allows, suggesting both the omniscience and omnipotence of God. God is not surprised when Jonah flees, and He does not need to look for Jonah, but watches him from His elevated position throughout the entire drama. Further, God is the “Most High over all the earth.” Before God “mountains melt like wax,” and “the earth sees and trembles.”

Elevation is a symbol of power, and the book of Jonah depicts God as the Sovereign over all creation.

The horizontal axis presents the complex relationship between God’s particularity and ubiquity. Limited as humans are by the confines of the body, in theatre—particularly minimalist theatre—God can only be presented in His particularity. It would be possible to use certain techniques to represent God’s ubiquity theatrically—such as a disembodied voice over the loud speakers—but this suggests that God is impersonal, and is Himself disembodied, which directly contradicts the way God is described in Jonah – as having a face, and as “hurling” the storm, much like a quarterback hurls a football. Because of this, God’s ubiquity must be intimated and suggested through action. The scene of God hurling the storm in v. 4, described above (Figure 2), provided the opportunity to show the irony of Jonah’s flight away from the face of a ubiquitous God.

In addition to the action that takes place on the vertical and horizontal axes, one other action is central to the first chapter of Jonah: fear. Three times, at crucial moments in the drama, the sailors “fear” (v. 5, 10, 16). Fear, because it is an emotion, would normally not be called an action. However, an action or gesture is required to

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103 Psalm 97.
communicate fear in performance. With each recurring instance, the sailors’ fear grows in size and profundity. In addition, the object of their fear further crystallizes. We represented each of the three instances of their fear with iconic gestures, frozen moments captured in the midst of action. Each character’s gesture, when taken together, creates a tableau that paints a picture of the physical, emotional, spatial, and spiritual ethos of the original moment.

For example, in v. 10 the sailors’ fear grows in both intensity and clarity. Not only did they fear, they feared a great fear (yir’ah gedola). Verse nine reports Jonah’s confession of faith in the “God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land,” whom he also claimed to fear. In a live performance, multiple actions can occur in more than one place at the same time, an effect called “simultaneity of action.”¹⁰⁴ We employed this effect to represent the sailors’ growing fear. Halfway through Jonah’s confession, the sailors have a realization. Jonah describes his God as the cosmic “God of heaven” who made the sea—which is roaring and raging against them—as well as the dry land—which is where the sailors would rather be at that moment. As Jonah speaks these words, the sailors’ fear is sparked once again, and they take a large step backwards from their position next to Jonah in the boat, shielding their faces from the “blow” of the news (Figure 4). This movement embodies the “flight” instinct inherent in fear.

However, the instinct to “fight” follows immediately on its heels: “What is this you have done?!?” they frantically ask Jonah. This question employs only three short words in Hebrew, and renders the raw emotion much more clearly as it is peppered with strong, staccato syllables: mah zot ʿasita. As they say this line, the sailors collapse the

¹⁰⁴ Harris, Theater, 30-34.
distance put between them and Jonah through their fearful retreat by quickly moving to a posture of intimidation, coming within inches of Jonah’s face (Figure 5). Not only are the sailors on a roller coaster of emotion as they navigate both the storm and this unwelcome stranger, but it is also becoming clear that they are beginning to feel the pressure of the diminishing options available to them to save their own lives. Soon they will be beyond desperate.

The other two instances of the sailors’ fear (v. 5, 16) involve gestures similar to the one described above and sketched out in Figure 4. In v. 16 their fear, stretched to its limit, now reaches its climax and is transformed from a generic and reproductive fear, to one that reaps a bountiful harvest: worship. By v. 16 the sailors no longer fear, they revere: they sacrifice a sacrifice to the Lord, and they vow vows to Him. Their fear, wandering through the open and turbulent sea finally and not without irony finds its home in Jonah’s “God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

**Implied Action**

The narrator directly describes much of the action and movement in the drama. However, a significant amount of activity happens “between the words” of the script. This implied action is often overlooked in both devotional and scholarly readings of the text. Beyond action understood as movement, the characters also have a particular bearing, tone of voice and facial expression which is implied in the script, and must be discerned (or decided) in order to present it.

Six examples of indirect or implied action will be described in this section. The first significant instance of implied action comes not only between words, but between
verses as well. Verse six ends with the Captain imploring Jonah to cry out to his god; perhaps, if he does so, they will not perish. Verse seven begins with the sailors’ suggestion of lot casting as a way to discern on whose account the storm has come upon them. Obviously something must have taken place to transition between “all eyes on Jonah” and instituting Plan B. It is clear that Jonah did not heed the captain’s words, for if he had, the casting of lots would not have been necessary. Nothing is reported by the narrator of Jonah’s response to the captain’s inquiry, which may imply that no response was given to report on. In v. 6 Jonah is sleeping. It may be possible that Jonah is so intent upon escaping the consequences of his actions that he continues to “force” sleep even through the captain’s call to action. That was our understanding of this moment. To illustrate this in our performance, after the captain speaks his lines, all eyes are on Jonah to see how he will respond, which he does by simply rolling over in his sleep. Dumbfounded, the sailors are forced to go to Plan B: casting lots. Other suggestions may be plausible for this moment, but this depiction is consistent with the character Jonah has shown thus far, and also gives expression to some of the humor that rests just beneath the surface of much of the drama.

The second example comes in the very next verse, as the sailors are casting their lots. Sasson reports that casting lots was an attempt to discern the will of the deity through unambiguous means.105 The sailors, being religious men, use a form of divination to reveal the culprit. In the context of the drama’s incipient theology, God is the Lord over all creation, and is the One who speaks through this casting of lots (rather than the gods the sailors sought). Further, in the script, the emphasis falls not on the exact

105 Sasson, Jonah, 108.
method employed to cast the lots, but on seeking divine knowledge. Therefore, God must be presented as the One who “drops” the lot “on Jonah” (v. 7).

Possible blocking for this scene could be as follows. As the sailors make their initial suggestion (“Come, let us cast lots . . .”), God moves forward from His position on stage (in Nineveh) to the edge of the upper stage so that he stands directly above the sailors (Figure 6). God arrives as the narrator says, “So they cast lots.” As the sailors make a gesture like they are tossing lots (vayyappilu goralot) up in the air (oblivious to the fact that God stands directly above them), God raises His hand, catches the lots, and drops one of them (vayyippol hagoral, “and the lot fell”) on Jonah (‘al yonah), who “sleeps” beneath the action. Blocking the scene this way again underscores the interconnectedness of God’s sovereignty and His particularity/ubiquity.

As a side note to this analysis, the case could be made that the translation of this line (vayyippol hagoral ‘al yonah) should be “And He [YHVH] dropped the lot on Jonah,” instead of “And the lot fell on Jonah.” It is true that YHVH is not the antecedent to the 3ms pronominal prefix he/it. In the context of the performance as I have just described it, however, YHVH may be the implied antecedent. Approaching the text as a script rather than as a literary work, therefore, broadens the grammatical possibilities in translation.

The final four examples all come in the closing verses of the drama. In v. 12 Jonah answers the sailors’ query about what is to be done to him in order to still the storm, by pushing them further out of their comfort zone: “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is on my account that this great
storm has come upon you.” The sailors—we are to assume—reject this offer and choose instead to attempt to row back to shore (v. 13). Complicating the presentation of this scene, however, is that v. 13 offers no transition between the sailors deliberating with Jonah and their straining at the oars (vayyakhteru ha’anashim). Somehow the sailors must get from discussing possible options with Jonah to refusing his suggestion by attempting their own.

The sailors’ prayer in v. 14 reveals the context for their rejection of Jonah’s suggestion. They initially refuse to sacrifice Jonah because they fear the possible repercussions—they don’t want blood on their hands before an almighty and powerful God. A significant repetition near the end of Jonah’s monologue is used to spark the sailors’ fear by confirming their suspicions about Jonah. Their fear becomes the key to facilitating a transition between the two scenes.

At the height of the sailors’ frustration with the silent and sleeping Jonah in v. 7 and v. 8, they repeat almost verbatim the same string of words that roughly mean “on whose account.” In v. 7 the sailors say the line to each other, suggesting that the lot-casting divination will determine “on whose account” (beshelemi) the evil has come upon them. In v. 8, after the lot singles Jonah out, the sailors direct the question to him: “Now you tell us on whose account (ba’asher lemi) this great evil has come upon us.” Here, in v. 13, Jonah finally identifies himself unambiguously as the object of both inquiries by repeating this phrase, only substituting the first person singular suffix for the interrogative pronoun mi: besheli (“on my account”). When the sailors hear Jonah speak these words all of their confusion dissipates, and they understand the situation clearly:
Jonah is the culprit and a sacrifice is required. At this moment—when Jonah says *besheli*—the sailors recreate the “fear tableau,” described above (Figure 4). Taking a step back allows the scene to break and provides an opportunity for the two sailors to then move forward and discuss their options. After a brief interaction the sailors reject Jonah’s offer by returning to their position in the boat at the oars to make a (futile) attempt to escape the storm and evade the sacrifice (Figure 7). Again, other representations of this transition are plausible. Our representation highlighted the recurrence of the sailors’ fear throughout the drama, and anticipated their expressed motivation for not wanting to kill Jonah, articulated in their climactic prayer in v. 14.

The fourth example comes later in the same verse (v. 13) and is, in some ways, God’s response to the sailors’ choice to refuse to sacrifice Jonah. The Narrator reports that the sailors were unable to return to the dry land because the storm “roared and raged upon them.” As the Narrator clearly stated in v. 4, this storm was the creation of God, and as He is the “God of heaven” whence came the storm, the implication is that He remains in control of the storm throughout all of its raging. Ultimately, therefore, it is the Lord, and not the storm, who prohibits the sailors from returning to dry land. The storm is the means by which God does this. The implied activity is on the part of God, directing the storm toward the ship in such a way as to prohibit passage back to land. We rendered this scene by reenacting God’s movement in v. 4 (Figure 2), with a slight variation. God begins the action exactly as He did before, only this time as God passes the ship on His way back to Nineveh, He snaps the fabric (the storm) *at the boat*, highlighting God’s unique role in prohibiting the boat’s passage back to shore (Figure 8).
The fifth example is taken from the beginning of the drama’s climax in v. 14: the sailors’ prayer to the Lord. The horizontal axis not only depicts the line from Nineveh to Tarshish, but also depicts the distinction being drawn in the drama between YHVH and the gods of the sailors. YHVH is located in Nineveh and the sailors are primarily concerned with appeasing the sea god. When the sailors cry out to their gods (v. 5), or implore Jonah to do likewise (v. 6), this distinction along the horizontal axis is in view (Figure 9). This is their practice until the crucial moment of their conversion when they turn and cry out to the Lord (Figure 10). Through the storm God made it impossible for them to turn their boat back to dry land, and so they turned their hearts to God instead.

This turning is all the more central because it anticipates the future conversion of the Ninevites. The technical term for this is “dramatic foreshadowing” and it differs from “literary foreshadowing” in that it is not described, but seen. Waxberg again: “Theatre must constantly direct [the audience] on not only what they are seeing, but also on what they will see.”\footnote{Waxberg, Actor’s Script, 132.} The emphasis falls on the action, not on the description. The Hebrew word for repentance (shuv) literally means “to turn around,” and the Narrator uses it in chapter three to describe the Ninevites’ response to Jonah’s message (ki shavu middarkam hara’ah). The horizontal axis, established by locating God in Nineveh, facilitated this dramatic foreshadowing and identified this moment as the beginning of the climax of chapter 1.

The final example concludes the climax with another action by God. It ought to be clear by this point that God is the main character of this drama and is orchestrating all its events, even though the Narrator does not explicitly state this at every turn. Since the
storm has been under God’s control throughout, and sacrificing Jonah stilled the storm as he predicted it would, God must be the One to bring the storm to rest. For example, in our performance, when the sailors throw Jonah into the sea, he lands on the ground partway up the center aisle. God then walks slowly and deliberately toward Jonah, carrying the storm-fabric. As God does this, every other character onstage is frozen in the position they took to throw Jonah into the sea. When God reaches Jonah, He slowly drapes the storm-fabric over Jonah, like a burial shroud, and returns to His place on stage (Figure 11). This is a powerful moment—often a holy moment. The theatre is silent; God is the only actor that moves; everything appears to happen in slow motion. The result of this action is not only worship on the part of the sailors, but often the members of the audience as well.

**Narration**

The Narrator’s role is utterly unique in the biblical dramas. Though he is a character in the drama, he simultaneously stands outside the events being incarnated onstage and mediates between them and the audience. This can happen in a number of ways. The Narrator controls the pacing of the performance, and directs the audience’s attention to the most salient action taking place on stage. Further, the Narrator expresses a particular point of view by the way the action is presented, by the particular tone of voice directed at each character or event, and by the particular way he relates to the scene or action. Not only so, but the Narrator speaks directly to the audience throughout the performance, and never engages with any of the other characters in a direct way.
As it is with a film—you only see what the director has chosen to include within the view of the screen, and your perspective is thereby shaped for a particular purpose—so it is with the biblical dramas. They are not haphazardly or simplistically written, but are intentionally and artistically crafted. The composer has fashioned the story with a purpose in mind, and every aspect of the drama—what is and is not commented upon, what the actors do and do not say, which events get included in the sequence of actions and which do not—all these are chosen intentionally with both theology and art in mind. It is the responsibility of the Narrator in the performance to communicate the composer’s purpose in the way the story is told. Three examples of the unique function of the narrator within the context of the performance will conclude this chapter.

In both v. 4 and v. 13, the Narrator speaks directly of the storm and its effects on the ship and its crew. In v. 4 God hurls a great wind upon the sea, and the ensuing storm gives rise to the sailors’ initial fear as they think their boat will be destroyed in the tumult. In v. 13 the narrator simply states that the sailors were unable to return to the dry land, “for the sea was roaring and raging against them.” I have already described each of these scenes in our performance in detail, but intentionally left an important element out of my comments on each scene: the role of the Narrator. As a prophet mediates between God and the people, so the Narrator mediates between actor and audience. A prophet is often described in Scripture as a “man of God.” In Hebrew, this title is, literally, “God-man” (‘ish ‘elohim). This suggests a unique relationship between the prophet and God. The prophet was manifestation of God’s love and justice on earth; he was a symbol of the
presence and power of God in the midst of the people. Where the prophet was, there too, was God.

In performance, the intimacy of this relationship between prophet and God can be woven into the blocking of the Narrator and God. In performance, the Narrator’s words cue almost all of the action. It is the same with God’s action. In v. 4 and v. 13, for instance, the Narrator’s description of God’s activity vis-à-vis the storm doubles as God’s cue to act. Not only do the Narrator’s words cue God’s activity, his actions do as well. Both God and the Narrator have been stationary until the storm in v. 4. At the repetition of the Divine Name the Narrator anticipates God’s movement by crossing the stage in front of the sailors and Jonah while describing God’s actions and the storm that ensues (Figure 2). The same anticipatory action on the part of the Narrator precedes God’s movement in v. 13 as well (Figure 8). Here, however, as the narrator passes in front of the sailors, who strain at their oars, he raises his hands, palms extended towards them in a gesture that suggests prohibition, further anticipating how God will hurl the storm directly at them this time, using the storm to prohibit their return to land.

The Narrator’s role is not only to accent God’s activity by anticipating His movements, it is also to direct the attention of the audience toward the most salient actions happening onstage at a given moment. One of the most significant moments in which this happens in our performance is in v. 7 (Figure 6). As God moves forward from His position in Nineveh to direct the course of the lot casting, the Narrator draws added

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107 In fact, the relationship between the Narrator and God is a fascinating area that needs to be developed beyond what I am capable of doing here. For instance, in some of the biblical dramas, the relationship seems to be so close between the Narrator and God that they could (should?) be performed by the same actor. I have seen this done to excellent effect on more than one occasion.
attention to God’s activity by joining him on the upper stage, watching Him closely and thereby focusing the audience’s attention on what God is doing. Because this moment is unexpected and, in a technical sense, unscripted, the Narrator’s presence alongside God, watching the lot fall with wonder, invites the audience to imagine the manifold ways God’s invisible hand is engaged in the daily events of their lives as well. Every character, save the Narrator alone, was oblivious to God’s physical presence on the boat, but the demands of theatre, and the nature of God’s particularity and ubiquity suggest that not only was God present there, but God is present—in a physical way—in the storms of our own lives as well.

Finally, the Narrator’s role in performance goes beyond just a mediating function. To switch from analogy to metaphor, the Narrator is the bridge—the means by which the “real world” of the audience and the “real world” being incarnated onstage converge. The Narrator is the only character in the performance who interacts directly with the audience. His or her responsibility is to enable transit between the twenty-first century C.E. and the tenth century B.C.E., between a sanctuary in West Michigan and a boat on the Mediterranean Sea. The other characters in the performance are simply experiencing the various elements of the story as they come, oblivious to the presence of an audience. The Narrator, on the other hand, is constantly moving between the two worlds, bringing them closer and closer together until, hopefully, they coalesce into a single reality through which transformation is rendered possible. This is not only the Narrator’s responsibility, it is the purpose for which he tells his story. His firm conviction is that this story—

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108 The script does not say “the Lord dropped the lot on Jonah,” although, as I have duly noted, it is grammatically possible, and the implication is very strong that this was, in fact, the assumption of Jonah, the sailors, the narrator, and the original audience as well.
whichever story it is—when encountered in performance, will reveal the character of God in such a way as to change the life of the person who witnesses it. This was as true in ancient Israel as it is today.
Conclusion

In the first chapter we realized that the categories set up by Sternberg—source and discourse—while helpful in many respects, ultimately proved inadequate to determine the genre of the biblical narratives. As they do with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, source- and discourse-oriented analyses provide helpful and necessary information, but it is of a penultimate sort; it serves a greater purpose. Source-oriented analysis offers insights into the historical, political, social and personal world of Shakespeare at the time of writing, which may illumine certain themes and meanings in the script that would either be confusing or misinterpreted without it. Discourse-oriented analysis helps make sense of the script as a literary work, studying Shakespeare’s use of language, how he uses repetition, rhyming, metrical structure, and so on to develop and highlight the conflict in the play. Neither source- nor discourse-oriented analyses are ends in themselves, but instead serve the ultimate purpose: the performance.

It is the same with the biblical narratives. In chapter two we discovered that, due to the oral context of their formation and transmission, these stories must have been performed. They could not have been taught or transmitted in any other way. The written documents that did exist served to embody and commemorate the spirit of the text contained in them, and aided the community’s memory. Eventually, though, Israel transitioned from a predominantly oral culture, to a text-oriented culture. All the stories held in the community’s heart were then committed to writing, yet they retained the basic character of their oral formation: an oral source yields an orally-influenced discourse. The shape of this “oral residue” is the indelible mark of the classic dramatic structure,
which runs like a vein through every biblical narrative. In light of this, it becomes clear that the genre of the biblical narratives is drama. The narratives are ancient plays.

The oral character of the biblical narratives demands an approach that takes this formative history seriously. Performance criticism is a methodology that does just that. The stories are committed to memory. Once the story gets “inside” the actor, the actor is able to get “inside” the story. This is the most efficient and effective way of discovering the underlying movements and spacing that lie latent within the text. In addition to blocking, the drama’s conflict is discerned and communicated through dialogue and narration. The actors’ bearing, tone of voice and facial expressions all contribute to the development of the conflict and its eventual resolution. The conflicts encountered in the biblical dramas are always theological in character, and are related to the presence and activity of God in the world, and to God’s character and purposes in and for the world.

When a drama is performed it comes to life in a way that is not possible through any other discipline or approach. Theatre—Brook’s “holy theatre”—incarnates an entire world of meaning and significance before a gathered audience. Through this experience they are invited to reconsider the very shape of reality, the presence of God in the world, and the character of this God. Further, the biblical dramas explore the human condition in all of its complexities and brokenness, joys and triumphs, loss and grief. The biblical dramas are performed not primarily to entertain, but to transform. Israel’s ancestors are made contemporary with the audience, and the original blessing they received from God is once again made accessible.
In the book of Jonah, we discovered that not only is the text dramatic, but it is a profound reflection on the character and presence of God in the world. Certainly, Jonah is about more than a disobedient prophet and a big fish. In fact, God is the main character of the drama, and Jonah His foil. Throughout the drama, God is—time and again, through direct and indirect actions—depicted as being a particular and ubiquitous God who is present in the midst of all of life’s evils, an all-powerful God who is sovereign over all creation, and a compassionate God who uses His power not to destroy, but to mitigate the violence humans enact against each other. Not only are there countless movements contained “between the words” of the text, but these movements, when made by bodies in space, deepen the experience of the conflict and sharpen in general the depiction of God’s presence in the world.

Jonah is just the beginning of this discovery process. My argument throughout has been that not only Jonah, but every biblical narrative can be engaged in this way, and to similar effect. I have had the privilege of working on several other passages over the last three years, and these experiences have only deepened my conviction of the effectiveness of this approach, and the possibilities latent in it. It is a method that can be applied by scholar and layperson alike, and each will discover truths that the other would not. Furthermore, both will certainly be changed through the process, if they come with an open and attentive heart.

Gone are the days when my study of Scripture is either a chore or a science. Now my study of the Bible is characterized by what the Scriptures themselves demand: a relationship. It contains elements of scientific analysis and certainly requires discipline,
but ultimately it is a joy. “Blessed are those . . . whose delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on His Law they meditate day and night.”

Hundreds of dramas still remain to be discovered and performed. Half of the Hebrew Bible has yet to be encountered in a way that is faithful to its fundamental character as an oral document. As performance criticism moves from infancy into adolescence, more and more resources like and unlike the present work will be produced that will make an important contribution to the study of Scripture, and will likely change the character and course of scholarly study of Scripture in significant ways. It will be exciting to watch this approach, still so fragile and fragmented in the field of biblical studies, as it grows and expands in efficiency and effectiveness. I, for one, look forward to the day when biblical scholars spend as much time in the auditorium as they do in the library or tucked away in offices, engaging the Scriptures with not only the mind, but with the body as well—and not alone, but in community. If that day ever comes, it will signal a new era in the field of biblical studies: an era of humility and vitality which may offer the possibility of healing to presently divided disciplines. Not only will Sternberg’s call to a “community or overlap” of disciplines apply within the field of biblical studies, but across multiple disciplines previously considered unrelated to the study of Scripture. Theatre studies, communication studies, music, kinesthetics, choreography, design—all these and more can contribute to a more effective and powerful engagement with Scripture. And one day, professionals in these areas may be called upon to aid biblical scholars in performing the biblical dramas. That would be exciting indeed.

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109 Psalm 1.1-2.
Appendix A—Jonah 1: A Translation for Performance

Part I—The Conflict

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,

\[2\] Get up! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out against her, for her wickedness has come up before my face.

3 And Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish, away from the face of the LORD. He went down to Jaffa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare and went down into the ship, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the face of the LORD.

Part II—The Development

Scene 1

4 And the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his god. They threw the cargo that was on the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. But Jonah went down into the bowels of the boat and he laid down and fell asleep. 6 The captain approached him and said,

What is this, you’re sleeping?!? Get up! Cry out to your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought and we will not perish.

Scene 2

7 Then the sailors said to one another,

Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this great evil has come upon us.

So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 Then they said to him,

Now you tell us on whose account this great evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?

He replied to them,

9 I am a Hebrew and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.
At this the men feared a great fear, and they said to him,

*What is this that you have done?*

For the sailors knew that he was fleeing from the face of the LORD, because he had told them. Then they said to him,

*What must we do to you, so that the sea will quiet down for us? For the sea is roaring and raging!*

He said to them,

*Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is on my account that this great storm has come upon you.*

Instead, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to the dry land, but they could not, for the sea was roaring and raging against them.

**Part III—The Resolution**

Then they cried out to the LORD, saying:

*O LORD! Do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you are the LORD! Whatever you desire, you do.*

So they picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea; and the sea stood perfectly still from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD with a great fear. And they sacrificed a sacrifice to the LORD. And they vowed vows.
Appendix B—Stage Directions for Jonah 1

Key to Characters:
G—God  J—Jonah  x—Ninevite
S—Sailor/Captain  N—Narrator
Bibliography


