I have recently translated the book of Lamentations with a Hebrew Translation Group comprising students, lecturers, and community members at St Mark’s. I convene the group and they kindly agree to join me in translating material that is useful for my ongoing research! My current project will be a contribution to a series of commentaries called “Reading the Old Testament” in which I will be reading the Megilloth (the five festival scrolls of Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther) through the lens of Biblical Performance Criticism.

As we completed the fifth and last chapter of Lamentations, we struggled to make sense of the final verse. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates it this way:

. . . unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure. (Lam 5:22)

The verse opens with the phrase ki‘im, a typical beginning for a conditional clause literally translated “for if”, but there is no “then” to complete
the thought. The first half of the verse makes use of a typical Hebrew construction of repetition of the root word to emphasize the statement, literally “for if rejecting, you reject us”, hence the NRSV translation “you have utterly rejected us”; and the second half of the verse in parallel fashion (another typical Hebrew poetic construction) restates the idea: “you are angry with us exceedingly.” Commentaries on the book of Lamentations make clear that not only is the Hebrew difficult to translate, the idea behind it is equally unsettling—that the book would end on a note of despair and uncertainty regarding God’s character rather than the hope that we expect with a typical lament poem.¹ There is a range of scholarly responses to this problem including “simply gloss[ing] over the difficulty”² as appears to the be case with the Greek and Syriac version; “distorting the Hebrew text . . . to yield a happy ending”;³ and the view that it is “wonderful because it is truthful, because it does not force hope prematurely, because it expresses what many in worlds of trauma and destruction know to be true.”⁴

One member of our Translation Group provides sound files of the books we are translating. As we listened to Lamentations 5 being chanted in Hebrew, we were surprised to hear that rather than ending on this problematic verse 22, the cantor returned to verse 21 which was repeated some eight times. A little more investigation revealed that this is common practice in the recital of the book by Jewish practitioners.⁵ Notably, the book is recited in full each year on Tishah B’Av—a Jewish commemoration of the destruction of the two temples and other tragedies. Rather than ending on the harsh and repeated statement of God’s judgement of Israel on this solemn day of fasting and mourning, the community returns to repeat the plea of the previous verse: “Restore us to yourself, Lord, and let us be restored. Renew our days like old!” For our translation group, it was the performance of the text that gave a new insight into its significance for the contemporary community.

This issue of St Mark’s Review is focused on the interface between the arts and theology. Performance is a key aspect of my research in Biblical Studies so in this article I aim to introduce the discipline of Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) and then show how I have used it to shed new light on Old Testament traditions.

Performance of Scripture
There is a sense in which Scripture has always been “performed”. This assertion is literally true for the Israelite community and the early church. Biblical
traditions themselves speak of performance events where God’s word was presented to audiences. Great leaders such as Moses and Joshua retold the covenant traditions to their communities to re-ignite their commitment to YHWH (Deut. 30; Josh. 23–24). In the seventh century BCE, King Josiah gathered the inhabitants of Jerusalem and read aloud the book of the law of the covenant that had been found in the temple (2 Kings 23). Around two hundred years later, the scribe Ezra read the book of the law again to the gathered community of returned exiles in Jerusalem, appointing Levites to translate and explain as it was being read (Neh. 8). The story of the judge Deborah (Judg. 4) sits beside the same story in the form of a song (Judg. 5), reflecting a pre-literary oral stage of the tradition. The song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2) was familiar enough to New Testament audiences for echoes of it to be found in Mary’s song (Luke 2). Nearly half of the superscriptions on psalms give instruction for performance with information about tunes (PSS. 22, 56, 60), instrumentation (PSS. 5, 55, 61), and liturgical use (PSS. 30, 92, 100, 120–134). Luke records Jesus standing and reading from Scripture before an assembled congregation (Luke 4) and all the gospels portray Jesus teaching disciples and crowds in a variety of locations: teaching that is subsequently inscribed in the gospels. The epistles of the New Testament were recited publicly to congregations (1 Thess. 5:27) as was the Revelation given to John for the churches, with the book itself beginning with the statement “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy . . . ” (Rev. 1:3).

The witness of the Scriptures themselves, therefore, remind us that the earliest transmission of biblical material was in an oral/aural context in which access to written materials was available only to an elite group in the community. The example of Deborah (Judg. 4–5) suggests that the older tradition (the song) was preserved initially in oral form before being inscribed as a text. Once these traditions became preserved as scripts, they continued to be circulated in communal contexts where they were performed orally by lectors or orators. In an oral culture, the same tradition will naturally be transmitted with variations due to different transmitters and different audiences. Written traditions served the oral culture. One of the major contributions that BPC has for Biblical Studies is to rediscover what has been lost as a result of the domination of print and text culture. Rather than a focus on text alone, we emphasise performance, meaning a communication event in which traditions are re-expressed for an audience.
For the interpretation of a message, therefore, the whole communica-
tion event is important. Communication events include particular social
settings, emotional dimensions, tone of voice, gestures, pauses and silence,
and audience reaction. BPC focuses not just on what is being said but how it
is being said. It reminds us of the centrality of the audience. In our modern
text-based culture with readily available multiple-translation access to the
Bible, we have forgotten that Scripture has closer affinity with ancient epic
poems than modern history and literature. Scripture was presented to audi-
ences in its first iterations and continues to play to new audiences down
through the centuries. Insights from oral-tradition scholars such as Albert
Lord and John Miles Foley have helped us recover the clues of underlying
performance that can be found even in written literature. Drawing out
remnants of oral performance can aid our interpretation of texts, because,
in the words of David Rhoads, “the medium is part of the message, if not the
message itself. Studying these texts in an exclusively written medium has
shaped, limited, and perhaps even distorted our understanding of them.”

BPC thus attempts both to establish the original performance event
as accurately as possible and to analyse new performances of these ancient
materials for new audiences.

BPC’s development as a method

BPC has emerged by applying the insights of many scholarly disciplines,
both in Biblical Studies and other academic areas, to existing biblical texts
with an emphasis on the oral foundations of the text.

The broader secular discipline of Performance Studies, although diffi-
cult to define, is itself an interdisciplinary field that includes theater studies,
cultural anthropology, linguistics, sociology, social psychology, ethnomusicol-
ogy, literary theory, and legal studies, amongst others. The common thread
is the study of performance and the use of performance as a lens to study
the world. To coin Shakespeare’s phrase: all the world is a stage, after all, not
a text! I have elucidated common threads across the field of Performance
Studies in the following themes: self-reflexivity (the performer is aware of
the separation between the self and the role), universality (performance is
a holistic means of communication and relevant to a broad range of experi-
ence), embodiment (performance relies on actual bodies in a shared space
with an audience), process (the actual activity of the performance is as
important or perhaps even more important than the completed event), and
re-enactment (all performance is based upon pre-existing models, scripts, or patterns).\textsuperscript{11} Finding these themes present in biblical texts allows us to recognize their essentially performative foundation.

The late professor of Performance Studies, Dwight Conquergood, lamented the division that grew between academics and practitioners that privileged written texts with their claim to objectivity and “empirical” knowledge and simultaneously disqualified non-written knowledge and experience as illegitimate. He described this as the contrast between “propositional” and “participatory” knowledge.\textsuperscript{12} He resisted the notion that unless fixed, measureable, and recorded, knowledge is not valued. This dichotomy has been greatest in communities where subalterns experience texts as instruments of power and control. Illegal immigrants in Conquergood’s home country of the United States, for example, are referred to as “undocumented” immigrants.\textsuperscript{13} Conquergood compared two different domains of knowledge: the “official, objective, and abstract” domain characterised as “the map”; and the “practical, embodied, and popular” domain characterised as “the story”.\textsuperscript{14} Conquergood argued that Performance Studies was able to reconnect the divided world of scholarship. He spoke of Performance Studies in alliterated terms: imagination, inquiry, and intervention; creativity, critique, and citizenship; or artistry, analysis, and activism.\textsuperscript{15} Each triad celebrates the artistic nature of performance, the need for academic study in order to explicate its usefulness, and a desire that this connect with the issues and concerns of contemporary society. A major strength of BPC, due to its focus on embodiment and audience response, is its explicit intention to relate biblical traditions to contemporary settings and issues. In other words, when we apply this contrast between “map” knowledge and “story” knowledge to Scripture, we \textit{should} be concerned if Biblical Studies takes its approach from within the first domain with its distanced and objective perspective. Scripture \textit{is} performed communication: between God and humanity, between faithful scribes and their readers, between communities of faith and subsequent generations for whom and to whom they preserve and pass on their traditions and convictions. Moreover, Scripture aims to transform its addressees, enabling them to embody the script and re-enact it in their own settings. For the faithful community, theory (theology) \textit{must} become practice (praxis)!
What contribution has BPC made to Biblical Studies?

In the field of Biblical Studies, BPC has built on the insights of form criticism, rhetorical criticism, text criticism, and narrative criticism but gone further than these methods by analysing the whole communication event rather than the text alone. A communication event comprises a communicator (speaker or writer), an audience, a biblical tradition, and a social situation. Each of these four aspects contributes to the meaning.

As already noted, embodiment is a key concept in performance, marking a shift from abstract knowledge to grounded, embodied knowledge. It is this second domain that includes extra-textual dimensions such as intonation, silence, gestures, emotion—all aspects of oral performance. In any communication event, meaning will be present that is not overt: BPC aims to go beneath the surface text to discover the whole performance “event”.

Some of the first biblical scholars to highlight the importance of oral performance in the formation of biblical traditions include New Testament scholars Werner Kelber, David Rhoads, and Tom Boomershine and Old Testament scholars Susan Niditch, Terry Giles, and William Doan.16 With a focus on the underlying oral culture, they applied theoretical investigation into how Scripture was composed, used, and received. The results of these investigations suggested that it may be necessary to re-evaluate accepted paradigms in scholarship. Is it possible, they might ask, to explain textual similarities and variants between the synoptic gospels (“the synoptic problem”) by multiple performances with oral/memory variants rather than assuming an underlying common textual source?

Scholars of BPC thus examine texts for their “oral imprint”: characteristics, formulas, patterns, rhythms, and lexemes that give evidence of original oral communication. In some cases, explicit evidence can be found (such as the instruction “let the reader take note” in Matt. 24:15 and Mark 13:14), but more often implicit evidence is discerned and highlighted. For example, a literal translation of the phrase that describes first Elijah and then Elisha dividing the waters of the Jordan is “he struck the waters and they divided here and here” (2 Kings 2:8, 14). The repetition of the demonstrative pronoun “here” implies a gesture on the part of the original performer that was incorporated into the written text.

An emphasis on this method is an extension of the work done by groups who have focused upon oral performance of biblical material, such as the organisation International Biblical Storytellers.17 Performers of biblical
traditions help us better appreciate what original audiences may have experienced, including aspects that emphasise certain features (for example, repetition), use of humour, and other emotive responses. Importantly, these performances also effectively demonstrate the multiple interpretations that arise when Scripture is performed since the extra-linguistic features mentioned above come into play. As Peter Perry notes:

Performance criticism also exposes the unreality of a search for an “original” version. Even if we assume that a manuscript has all the words and letters that an author penned, we can’t reproduce the embodiment that the author envisioned. Even if the exact words are used in the same language, every performer of that text will say the words slightly differently based on their own preferences and interpretation. Every audience will hear it differently based on their preconceptions and the situation.  

Biblical scholars who employ actual performance of Scripture as a method of research argue that they are given new insight into the text as they enter into performance. Let me offer an example of this technique at work.  

The first chapter of the book of Habakkuk is analysed by most commentators as a dialogue between the prophet and his God, with the prophet speaking in verses 2–4, YHWH in verses 5–11, and the prophet again in verses 12–17. But this division of the text is not necessarily supported when the text is performed. Whilst rehearsing the chapter for a performance, Peter Perry became convinced that the identity of the speakers should be re-assigned, so that other than verses 1 and 5a, the entire chapter should be understood as speech of the prophet. He explains:

God’s speech is usually taken to continue until [verse 11] . . . The problem is that God’s introduction is positive. God calls the audience and the nations to attention. God invites them to be astounded, which sounds like they will be impressed with the solution. God announces that this is a “work being worked in your days,” as if it is a satisfactory response to Habakkuk’s complaint . . . After building up the audience’s expectation of a positive solution to injustice in Judah, I had trouble announcing the Chaldeans as “hurtful
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and hasty” (1:6b) . . . Instead of a statement, I made 1:6b into a rhetorical question the prophet speaks in shock to God’s revelation that God had raised up the Chaldeans.20

Perry, Rhoads, Boomershine and other scholar-performers use actual memorisation and performance of Scripture as a method for interpretation. My own work shares a similar commitment to performance but focuses on seeking the aspects of performance inherent in texts. The question that guides my commentary on biblical material is “What do we gain if we consider the biblical texts as scripts for performance?”21

Creativity, commentary, and connections in biblical performance
Taking my cue from the work of Dwight Conquergood, I have approached texts through a threefold paradigm of creativity, commentary, and connections to highlight their underlying performative nature. I aim to explore the artistic creativity of biblical composition in all its variety aided by original iconic translation in order to elicit Scripture’s original artistry. Academic analysis of underlying performative features that remind us of the origin of Scripture as communication events involving live audiences aids us in re-applying those traditions for contemporary audiences. Appreciation of the open-ended nature of performance enables us to make connections across the historic and geographic divisions between ancient texts and contemporary audiences by focusing on how such traditions connect with the issues and concerns of our time and place. I will further elaborate on each of these aspects with examples below. As will be evident, BPC is a method that strives to bridge the gap between academic and popular uses of biblical traditions.

Creativity
To focus on the creativity of Scripture is to be alert to both the underlying oral foundation and the compositional skill of the literary scribe. The way that we can most readily access these are through performance-sensitive translations of the Hebrew texts. If texts were composed to be heard, they were composed as “scripts”. Careful translation elicits aspects of performance that might otherwise go unnoticed: repetition, wordplay, implied gestures, expectation of audience reception and involvement, use of grammatical forms, pauses, and silence that intend to engage audiences.
Repetition
In oral performance repetition is used effectively to engage audiences by reminding them of important information or linking different parts of a performance together. Modern translations of Scripture can miss these links, perhaps as a result of composition that aims to be pleasing to the eye rather than the ear. When I translate Old Testament passages, I use the same English word when a Hebrew word or root is the same wherever possible. This allows for the repetition of sounds and ideas that the original audience would have heard to be conveyed to a new audience.22

In the first chapter of Jonah there is a textual link between the Israelite prophet Jonah and the pagan sailors on the boat going to Tarshish that is not noticed in many English translations. When the storm breaks out the sailors are “afraid” (Jon. 1:5, NRSV) and cast lots to discover who is responsible for the ill luck. When Jonah is asked his identity, he claims to “worship the Lord” (Jon. 1:9, NRSV), after which the sailors are “even more afraid” (Jon. 1:10, NRSV). Before tossing the recalcitrant prophet overboard, the sailors pray to the Lord, asking forgiveness for the act they are about to take, and afterwards the text reads: “Then the men feared the Lord even more” (Jon. 1:16, NRSV). Significantly, the words “worship” and “afraid/fear” are translating the same underlying Hebrew word יָעֵשׁ. Both English words are valid translations for the Hebrew, but within this context the same intention is behind the use of the word. Either Jonah and the sailors “worshiped” YHWH or Jonah and the sailors “feared” YHWH. I am convinced that it was the intention of the original composition to deliberately contrast Jonah with the sailors by using the same word, and our translations should reflect that. Jonah’s reluctance to fear/worship YHWH by running away from his calling is contrasted with the pagan sailors’ willingness to fear/worship the God of the Israelites.

Biblical narrative is often described as paratactic and repetitive. The gospel of Mark has long been recognized for its episodic quality and frequent use of the word “immediately” (εὐθὺς), a characteristic well served in the NRSV translation. Much early BPC scholarship concentrated on the gospel of Mark as its underlying orality seemed so evident.23 In Hebrew, narrative episodes are characteristically strung together with a concentration of וַיְיִגְּדֵל (narrative past) verbs at the beginning of phrases. Many translations mask this style as the conjunction “and” (וַּאֲרָב) at the beginning of the verb is often ignored, but for a narrative that is heard, the repetition of the
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conjunctive *vav* is rhythmic and obvious. When translated literally there is a sense of ongoing movement reflected in the text. Compare the NRSV translation of 1 Kings 19:2–8 with my own below:

Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. (NRSV)

And he saw, and he got up, and he went for his breath, and he came to Beer-Sheba which belongs to Judah, and he left his lad there. And he went into the wilderness, on the way for a day, and he came and he sat under a solitary *rothem.* And he asked his breath to die, and he said “Too much now YHWH. Take my breath because no better am I than my fathers.” And he lay down and fell asleep under a solitary *rothem.* And behold! This messenger touching him and he said to him “Get up! Eat!” And he observed and behold! At his head a loaf of hot coals and a pitcher of water. And he ate and he drank and he turned and he lay down. And he turned—the messenger of YHWH—a second time and he touched on him and he said “Get up! Eat! For too much from you is the way.” And he got up and he ate and he drank, and he went in the strength of that eating forty
days and forty nights until the mountain of God—Horeb.

(my translation)

My translation arguably presents a more desperate Elijah running until he is out of breath but being hurried along towards Horeb. The repeated “ands” at the beginning of each sentence, replicating the Hebrew, keep the narrative moving along rapidly. Notice other repeated words that are lost in the NRSV translation including the threefold “breath” (nefeš), translated as “life” only twice in NRSV. Each of the following words that are repeated twice are interjections or imperatives, adding urgency to the narrative: “And behold!” (wehinnēh), “Get up!” (qūm), “Eat!” (’kōl). Ironically, the NRSV adds “and” where it does not occur in the Hebrew in verses 5 and 7.

Wordplay
Some have argued that techniques of wordplay in Hebrew, especially poetry, are impossible to reproduce in English translation. In my view, however, with thought and imagination one might attempt suitable translations. Even partial replication of the original wordplay conveys some of the impact for the original audience. Each of the following examples comes from the prophetic tradition.

In the first chapter of Jonah there is wordplay that can be effectively replicated. The phrase ḥôlēk wesō’ēr is used twice, underscoring the intensity of the whirlwind (Jon. 1:11, 13), but is translated with different phrases in the NRSV as “[the sea] was growing more and more tempestuous” (v 11) and “[the sea] grew more and more stormy” (v 13). In both verses, I translate the repeated phrase as “[the sea] was stomping and storming” to capture the similar vowel sounds underlying the phrase. I have also attempted to replicate at least a little of the alliteration and sibilance of the similar sounding vowels and consonants in the Hebrew phrase ḥiššēbāh lehiššābēr, translated in the NRSV as “[the ship] threatened to break up” with the translation “[the ship] thought herself to be bashed to bits” (Jon. 1:4).

In Isaiah 5:7, the Hebrew words mišpăh/mišpāṭ/ts’āqāh/ts’dāqāh are translated in the NRSV with no wordplay at all as “he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry.” A possible translation to capture the wordplay is “outpouring of justice/outpouring of blood//outpouring of righteousness/outcry of distress” or even “righteousness/routed//righted/rooted”. Similarly, Jeremiah’s “almond tree” (šāqēd) that is
“watching” (šoqēd) could perhaps be translated with the words “almond” and “omen” with the repetition of consonants achieving a similar effect as the original Hebrew (Jer. 1:11–12).

Most commentaries on the book of Micah will now acknowledge the evident punning in 1:10–15 although few English translations reflect it. Rather than transliterating impossible to identify places as in most versions, Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* captures the original wordplay in which the place-names are evidently puns on the prophetic message:

Don’t gossip about this in Telltown.
Don’t waste your tears.
In Dustville,
roll in the dust.
In Alarmtown,
the alarm is sounded.
The citizens of Exitburgh
will never get out alive.
Lament, Last-Stand City:
There’s nothing in you left standing.
The villagers of Bittertown
wait in vain for sweet peace.
Harsh judgment has come from God
and entered Peace City.
All you who live in Chariotville,
get in your chariots for flight.
You led the daughter of Zion
into trusting not God but chariots.
Similar sins in Israel
also got their start in you.
Go ahead and give your good-bye gifts
to Good-byeville.
Miragetown beckoned
but disappointed Israel’s kings.
Inheritance City
has lost its inheritance.
Glorytown
has seen its last of glory.27
It should be evident from these examples that original audiences of Hebrew and Greek scripts would have noticed the intended humour and allusion inherent in such wordplay.

**Audience reception**

Much biblical interpretation is via silent reading with an audience of one. BPC begins with the assumption that Scripture was originally presented to larger audiences in communal settings and looks for clues in the text that convey this original setting. Merely attending to person and gender in verbal forms in the original languages can elicit such information. Once again, English translations can mask the presence of plural forms or gender-specific forms when second person verbs are used, since we do not distinguish between singular and plural or male and female when using “you” and “your”. When the original language shifts between forms one can infer audience presence. In the book of Habakkuk, for example, the first chapter opens with a prayer complaint (Hab. 1:2–4) addressed by the prophet (first person) to YHWH (second person singular) but when the deity responds (Hab. 1:5) it is with second person plural verbs. YHWH is not just addressing the prophet, but a larger audience.

Whilst aspects of embodiment that are so critical to performance are less obvious in a written text, the ancient diacritics in Hebrew Scripture give some indication of original performance. In particular, I have paid attention to the section markings, the *setumah* (ס) and *petuah* (פ) that are found in the Hebrew text, marking the end of units for recitation.28 The end of a unit implies a pause in the performance. When such diacritics occur in the midst of a larger unit, one could imagine a brief silence that would be noted by an audience. An intriguing example comes from the same episode in the life of Elijah referred to earlier. After his brief sojourn under the rothem tree in the wilderness, Elijah comes to the cave at Mount Horeb and is met there by YHWH. Twice YHWH asks a question of Elijah: “What are you doing here Elijah?”(1 Kings 19:9, 13). Both times Elijah responds with exactly the same answer:

Zealously zealous have I been for YHWH the god of hosts while they have forsaken your covenant—the sons of Israel: your altars they threw, your prophets they slew—with the
sword—and I am left, I alone, and they are seeking my breath to take it (1 Kings 19:10, 14, my translation).

In between the first and second sets of questions and answers we have the wind, earthquake, and fire, followed by the “still small voice” that signaled the presence of YHWH. Since Elijah’s speech is exactly the same as his first speech, the setumah that follows immediately after it implies a pause, perhaps as an implied frustration on the part of YHWH, who may be wondering why nothing has changed for this prophet. YHWH then changes tack and sends him off on new missions including anointing a new prophet.

A setumah in the fourth chapter of Jonah gives a similar opportunity for silent reflection on the part of an audience. It comes after Jonah’s prayer-speech following the unwelcome (to him) grace of God after Nineveh repents. In the prayer, Jonah acknowledges that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” and as a result he was ready to die (Jon. 4:2–3). The setumah gives time for this astoundingly contradictory thought to be processed before YHWH speaks to Jonah, asking if his anger is good. The chapter is marked by three questions of YHWH, with the last going unanswered. To my mind, this is another invitation for audience participation in the script. Since Jonah does not answer the question of whether God should show mercy to ignorant humans and livestock (Jon. 4:11), it is up to us to do so.

Hebrew diacritics include pause markers within verses also. The Masoretes placed an atnah accent in almost every verse of the Hebrew Bible as a mid-way point for the verse to aid in recitation. I think there is an intention to have a short break after the atnah, but it does not always occur literally in the middle of the verse, and so its placement can have an impact on how an audience will respond to the material. A good example of this is Genesis 22:10, part of the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Reading the verse with attention to this feature results in the following:

“And Abraham sent out his hand, and he took the knife [pause] to slaughter his son.”

Here one can imagine the horror of anticipation felt by the audience. Notable also is the following verse where most of the verse is to be read before the next atnah, suggesting that the story rushes on quickly to prevent the terrible act of plunging the knife:
But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” [pause] And he said, “Here I am.”

The judicious placement of diacritics thus highlights the drama of Scripture and invites audience participation.

**Commentary**

Once a performance-sensitive translation has been established, a commentary is undertaken to highlight performative features embedded in the texts. In addition to the clues underlying oral events behind the written text, I investigate whether the text easily breaks into scenes and acts, and whether there are implicit “stage instructions” relating to time, space, action, costumes, and props.

The prophetic literature is especially open to being read as scripts. The biblical prophets were actively engaged in performance. They spoke publicly before audiences. They mediated between God and their communities, including religious and political leaders. Sometimes they addressed their own communities, and other times came as outsiders to address a new community. Whether prophets of doom or hope, they spoke into “liminal” moments—a term borrowed from Performance Studies that describes times of political and social crisis where normal cultural structures and activities are suspended, leaving the community open to critique or new vision. Prophets used symbolic action and invested meaning in ordinary objects and events. They were not merely channels for mediation but embodied communicators who were significantly impacted by their role. Occasionally their performance is akin to street theater or performance art, aiming both to gain attention and actively involve the audience.

The performance themes of self-reflexivity, universality, process, and embodiment can all be found in Scripture, and a BPC commentary will seek to highlight these themes. Whether prophetic literature, historical narrative, or wisdom material, Scripture provides characters that serve as models for faithful re-enactment. This focus on re-enactment allows us to examine innovative use of familiar formulas might cause an audience, whether ancient or contemporary, to re-assess their understanding of Scripture for their own unique situation.

I have adopted the term “ready-mades” from improvised performance as short-hand for the terms or phrases that have connection to other parts of
Scripture that in their use evoke other settings and potentially reshape the conventional meanings of those words and phrases. Such ready-mades are clues to the improvisation of traditions by new performers in new settings.

By way of example, let me share some insights from a performance commentary of the prophet Ezekiel. Self-reflexivity is a characteristic of prophets in general, and of Ezekiel in particular. Prophets themselves are not the primary agent of their message. The grammar of the Hebrew word “to prophesy” with its reflexive stem conveys the idea that the message is directed to the prophet as much as to the audience. Like an actor, a prophet performs the words prepared by the scriptwriter. This is evident from Ezekiel’s commissioning:

Son of humanity, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to nations of rebellious ones who rebelled against me, They and their fathers transgressed against me until this self-same day. And the sons are stubborn of face and hard of heart. I am sending you to them. And you will say to them, “Thus says YHWH”! And whether they hear or whether they forbear —that house of bitter rebellion— They shall know that a prophet was among them.

(Ezek. 2:3–7, my translation)

In the autobiographical, embodied performances reported in the early chapters of the book of Ezekiel, the prophet shows that the prophetic calling is a bitter-sweet experience. Swallowing the scroll (Ezek. 2:8–10) is reported as a delightful event, in spite of the bitter inscriptions (“laments, and sighings, and woes”). But the prophet is immediately told he will have an unreceptive audience. We sense the difficulty Ezekiel has in the substance of his commissioning where he is not given an actual message to speak, but is merely told to say “Thus says YHWH” (Ezek. 2:4; 3:11, 27). Nevertheless, as a “watchman” his task is to deliver this message and ensure that it is heard, because otherwise he carries the responsibility for the fate of the people whose blood will be upon his hands (Ezek. 3:17–21). And all this is to be
done “whether they hear or whether they forebear” (Ezek. 2:5, 7; 3:11). The experience, he is told, will be akin to sitting among thistles and thorns and scorpions (Ezek. 2:6), yet YHWH’s reassuring exhortation “do not be afraid” is underscored by repetition (Ezek. 2:9; 3:6). For Ezekiel, to be a prophet is an embodied, uncomfortable calling: he is bound and tongue-tied (Ezek. 3:25–26) and compelled to repetitive and restricted action by lying in one place for vast lengths of time and eating the same diet (Ezek. 4:4–11). Nonetheless, the awed descriptions of his visions of the glory of YHWH (Ezek. 1:4–28; 10:4, 10:18–19; 11:22–23) give a glimpse into his sense of privilege.

One of Ezekiel’s visions is a judgement scene, described in great detail, and involving a number of props and ready-mades:

> And behold! Six men coming from the way of the gate—the upper one—that were turning northward, and each a tool of destruction in his hand, and one man in the middle of them “Clothed in Linens,” and the writing kit of the scribe in his loins.

> And they came and they stood beside the altar of bronze.

> And the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from over the cherub that was over him to the threshold of the house

> And he called to the man, the one Clothed in Linens, who had the writing kit of the scribe in his loins.

> And YHWH said to him: Pass over in the middle of the city in the middle of Jerusalem

> And mark a mark on the foreheads of the men—the ones groaning and the ones moaning over all the abominations being made within her. Pass over the city after him and smite.

> Do not spare your eyes and do not show pity

> Old, a young man, and a maid, and a little one, and women you shall slay for destruction, but on every man who has on him the mark you shall not touch. And from my holy place you shall begin. (Ezek. 9:1–6, my translation)
The reference to the “north” (Ezek. 9:2) could be understood as a ready-made since judgement in the form of foreign armies usually came from the north in Israel’s experience, rather than crossing the desert directly from the east. The setumah after verse 3 suggests an ominous pause prior to the onslaught of the slaughter.

My translation, “mark a mark”, (Ezek. 9:4) reflects the Hebrew where the same root letters form the verb and the noun. But the noun in Hebrew is literally “taw”—the name of the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet (ת), usually transliterated with the letter “t”. In old Hebrew script this letter looked more like an “x”. The mark was to be placed where it could be easily seen, on the foreheads.

The Damascus document from the Qumran community records the same ritual. Those bearing a taw on their forehead will be saved at the time of the final judgment. The church father, Origin also referred to the tradition, recording explanations given to him by Jewish commentators. One noted that taw is the first letter of the word Torah, so the one with the taw is the one who has followed the law from Aleph (א) to Taw (ת)—the equivalent of A to Z. Another Christian Jew suggested that it represented the cross, the “T” of the Christian faith. In Revelation 7:2–3 an angel marks the 144,000 servants of God with a “seal” on their foreheads, destining them for eternal salvation.30

Each of these references to the forehead mark could be understood as re-enactments of Ezekiel’s script. Yet another re-enactment makes a notable improvisation by referring to the mark on the forehead as the sign of those who are marked out for punishment, rather than preservation (Rev. 13:16–17, 14:9–11). It is this forehead mark that has survived most strongly in popular culture, known by the name “the mark of the beast.”

Plots, scene division, use of time and space, and analysis of actors within the drama are all aspects considered in a performance commentary. In the performance of Ezekiel, YHWH is a major actor alongside the prophet, fulfilling the role of both director and actor. A refrain sums up the divine self-introduction of this actor-director: “I, YHWH, have spoken, and I will act” (Ezek. 17:24; 22:14; 24:14; 36:36; 37:14). The drama’s one major plotline is that Israel has rejected the covenant and must be punished, but a new future is possible. The script conveys that message via embodied performance art, visions, fables, songs, proverbs, soliloquies, and even pornography. The
actor-director at the centre of the Ezekiel performance is willing to shock and alienate audiences both ancient and contemporary.31

**Connections**

Biblical Performance Criticism with its emphasis on embodied experience rejects a dichotomy between theory and practice. I use the term *connections* to investigate the opportunities for re-enactment of biblical traditions in our own contexts: places where performance in Scripture “hits the ground in practice.” Careful attention to performance events in Scripture can inform attitudes and actions of adherents of Scripture in our times and places.

By way of example, episodes from the performance of Elijah in 1–2 Kings raise possible connections for a twenty-first-century audience. His interactions with a widow and her son in Zarephath, outside of Israelite territory, prompts the need to welcome and minister to “the other”, especially those living in poverty (1 Kings 17:8–24). The prophet Obadiah, who works alongside Elijah but uses different methods to confront persecution, illustrates the exercise of civil disobedience in the context of misuse of power by the ruling forces (1 Kings 18:3–4). An analysis of the bias underlying the portrayal of Jezebel in 1–2 Kings along with a critique of the Mount Carmel episode (1 Kings 18:20–46) requires a contemporary audience to consider healthy and respectful interfaith dialogue. When Elijah confronts Ahab over the matter of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21), the performance offers direct connections to our contemporary issue of land rights. Even the strange embodied action of Elijah that may have been prayer for rain in the context of drought (1 Kings 18:42b–45) connects with our concerns for the preservation of the created world against the backdrop of the environmental crisis.

Biblical traditions themselves function as ready-mades for contemporary audiences due to familiarity with their content through long use in church settings and academic study. BPC aids us in recognising aspects of engagement with ancient audiences that can be replicated via performance-sensitive translation so that contemporary audiences can be similarly surprised and challenged by these performances in Scripture. Viewing biblical traditions through the lens of BPC, then, enables these ancient traditions to continue to have relevance today.
Endnotes

4 O’Connor, *Tears of the World*, 79.
5 See also Hillers, *Lamentations*, 101.
6 The psalms listed here are merely examples amongst many others that could have been selected.
7 Mark Biddle points to the earlier oral tradition in his exposition on Judges 5: “The song seems to represent a quite ancient tradition that predated its inclusion in the book of Judges . . . its structure, tone, and themes offer significant indications that the song once served a liturgical purpose and that, as a piece meant for public performance, it functioned to evoke a public response.” *Reading Judges: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2012), 63.
13 The hegemony of the written document was underscored for me when I supported a refugee to Australia who wished to change the “legal” surname of her children to match a new surname she had chosen for herself. The family had arrived in a refugee camp with no “papers” and were registered under the woman’s father’s name. As an adult, my friend was entitled to change her own surname but in order to change the surname of her dependents (which had only ever existed on paper) we had to attend the
Supreme Court and establish to the judge’s satisfaction that the children no longer had communication with their biological father, a man who had abused and abandoned them. The existing surname of the children was not even *his* name, but his permission was still required under registration laws. Happily, our case was successful.

14 Conquergood, “Performance Studies,” 145.
15 Conquergood, “Performance Studies,” 152.

20 Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism*, 96–97. The translation used was my own, from *Performing Habakkuk* (2012).
22 To return to my example of Elijah/Elisha parting the waters of the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8, 14), it is impossible to find a modern translation that preserves the repetition of “here”—instead a contrast is used such as “hither and thither” (KJV), “the one side and the other” (NRSV), “to the right and to the left” (NIV).
Scripture as performance


24 Some manuscripts read “and he was afraid” (*wayyirā‘*) instead of “and he saw” (*wayyare‘* ) here. “Afraid” is appropriate in the context and could have been changed by later transcribers who were not comfortable portraying Elijah as fearful. Notice, however, that Elijah is described as “afraid” in 2 Kings 1:15, undermining this suggestion of editorial manipulation. So “saw” could also be accepted as the original intention. We know from 1 Kings 21:8 that Jezebel communicated by letter, which is perhaps how the message was delivered in this situation also (1 Kings 19:2).

25 There is much speculation in commentaries as to the identity of this plant. It has been transliterated in the Septuagint and I have also settled for a transliteration.


28 These markings are found in the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Samaritan Pentateuch, giving evidence for a much older tradition than the tenth century CE Masoretic Text.

29 The translation of this phrase *demāmāh daqqāh* is problematic. It appears to be some form of wordplay since it is a rhyming phrase which is unusual in Hebrew. It is usually translated “still, small” or “calm, soft” but arguably could also be translated “roaring and thundering” (see J Lust, “A Gentle Breeze or a Roaring Thunderous Sound?” *Vetus Testamentum* 25, no. 1 (1975): 110–15; 113). This is an example of the impact of translation on performance.


31 Likening the Israelites to an innocent child-bride turned rampant whore (Ezek. 16) would have been as reprehensible to an ancient male Israelite audience as it is to a contemporary feminist reader.