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## Prophets Performing as Public Theologians

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### The turn to performance

In 2008, Tracy Davis, professor of performance studies at Northwestern University, wrote of the “performative turn” (2008:1) as a movement that has become increasingly influential across a wide range of academic disciplines. While for many the term “performance studies” remains grounded in the aesthetic arts, there is also a broader view of performance as a heuristic device to account for the social and cultural interactions that are being analysed, in linguistics, anthropology and sociology, for example. Theology and Biblical studies are two academic fields that have begun recently to use performance as a methodological tool in researching the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures. At times the language of performance is used simply as a metaphor for the message of Scripture or the life of faith, ranging from Hans Urs von Balthasar’s monumental *Theodrama: Theological dramatic theory* (1973-1983) to a popular volume by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen entitled *The drama of Scripture* (2004) in which Scripture is divided into six acts culminating in Act 6, “The return of the king.” Other scholars are attempting a deeper engagement with performance studies. Some take up terminology and methodology from other areas of performance studies where obvious correlation exists, such as examining rituals or performative speech acts in Biblical texts (eg “Let there be light”). Others are seeking to discover intrinsic performative features in the text itself, regardless of whether or not the text was ever a performance piece in its original setting. My own post-graduate work has been following in this latter direction. I have sought to read a Biblical text as a “script” open to thoughtful and engaged re-enactment through appropriation of its message with small but significant changes brought about by the new setting of contemporary faith communities.

### Why performance methodology is particularly apt for reading Scripture

In my opinion performance criticism is a particularly apt method for reading the Bible. Ronald Pelias defines “all human communication” as “an act of performance” (1992:5). He counters the negative connotations that often arise suggesting performance is fundamentally “pretence” by arguing that all communication events involve a choice of roles governed by the variety of situations that an individual finds him/herself in each day. “One’s ‘real self’ is a composite of all these roles” (1992:6). He concludes: “[P]eople fundamentally are performing creatures who engage in an ongoing process of giving speech to their thoughts and feelings. Through the act of performing, people make their lives meaningful and define themselves” (1992:6). Scripture is communication: between God and humanity; between faithful scribes and their readers; between communities of faith who

preserve and pass on their traditions and convictions to subsequent generations. In Pelias' terms, those acts of communication may be considered performances.

Audience transformation is a shared goal between those who read Scripture as a performance and those who are engaged in the performing arts (cf. Glavin 2004:32, Doan & Giles 2008:29). While the presence of an audience is essential to the concept of performance, with its inherent expectation that a public demonstration of skills will be displayed, the traditional division between actor and audience is breaking down. In performance art in particular the boundaries between artist and spectator have blurred such that the audience often finds itself on stage (Sherwood 2006:3). This phenomenon of audience participation is more characteristic of contemporary drama, but can be found explicitly in traditional theatre, such as when Prospero turns to the audience at the end of *The Tempest* and asks for prayer, forgiveness and mercy. Reflecting on this, Paul Fiddes says:

The barriers between art and life are being broken down. We had thought that Prospero was safely locked away on the stage 'in a play,' but with a shock we find that he is drawing us into the reality of his own story . . . The drama has not finished after all, and we feel that it never will be (2000:30).

When a passage of Scripture is understood as a performance, a faithful audience should become actors, embodying the script and re-enacting it in their own setting. I mention a "faithful" audience, but the use of performance criticism is a reminder that Biblical interpretation should always take place in the public arena – the church does not do its theology "behind closed doors" but instead needs to be engaged with its context: social, political and philosophical.

### **Special application to prophetic literature**

When turning to Biblical texts it is apparent that the prophetic literature is especially open to being read through the lens of performance criticism, not only because much of it could be considered poetic drama, but also because the prophets were clearly performers. A common understanding of prophecy is that prophets were mediators between God and the community, including political and religious leaders. Sometimes this was their own community, at other times they came as outsiders and addressed a new community. Whether prophets of doom or of hope they spoke into "liminal" moments. Liminality is a term used in performance studies to describe departure from normal cultural structures and activities, most clearly recognised in initiation rites or in social occasions that depart from the normal structures of life such as carnival. In relation to the prophets the term "liminal" can also be used to describe times of political and social crisis for the Israelite community. At such times prophets offered a critique or a new vision requiring a change of behaviour or attitude on the part of their listeners. They used symbolic action and invested meaning in ordinary objects and events. They were not merely channels for mediation but embodied communicators. Their message quite often affected them physically or mentally, and in some cases had life-long implications.

Let me give some examples of prophetic performance from the Hebrew Bible, all of which describe actions taken by prophets in response to the belief that they had heard God's instructions.

The eighth century book of Hosea describes how the prophet married a woman who had been a temple prostitute to portray the commitment of God to Israel despite their flirtation with foreign gods (Hos 1,3). Hosea also named his children with symbolic names – one child was called “Jezreel” – the name of a battleground conjuring up images of bloodshed and death and akin to naming your child “Gallipoli”; “Lo-ruhamah” is often translated “Not pitied” but the name is based on an active verb; “Lo-ammi” (Not my people) is a negation of the covenant (Hos 2, see also Isa 7).

Jeremiah is a prophet that readily comes to mind when symbolic action is mentioned. There is a lively debate over the book of Jeremiah as to how much of it accurately it represents a historical figure (Holladay 1986) and how much reflects Deuteronomistic ideology (Carroll 1986). It is certainly true to say the *persona* at the centre of the book uses many symbolic acts, some only brief and some more substantial, and he seems more than many other prophets to embody the message of judgement and hope in his own life. At the time leading up to the Babylonian invasion Jeremiah invited leaders of the Jerusalem community to go to the edge of the city where he took a pot and smashed it to the ground symbolising the coming destruction of the city (Jer 19). Taking witnesses fulfilled the need for prophetic action to have an audience, but like performance art the audience were unwittingly drawn into the drama. Their shock at the action of the prophet smashing a newly-bought flask prefigured the shock of those who would see the city fall.

A little later Jeremiah bought a field near Jerusalem at the time when Babylon was besieging the country and when he himself was imprisoned, as a mark of faith in a future time when Israel would again be living peacefully in her own land (Jer 32). At the time that he bought the field, the land was in the control of the Babylonians.

Ezekiel, the Masterchef of the prophets, was instructed on one occasion to boil meat in a rusty pot, remove the meat then boil the pot dry over a fierce heat to burn away any remaining impurities (Ezek 24). The book of Ezekiel is set in exile in Babylon where the prophet is portrayed as part of the exilic community. In this drama, called in Hebrew a *משל*, *mashal* (parable or proverb),<sup>1</sup> the pot represented Jerusalem whose fate was symbolised by the fierce heat, the removal of meat to show how the inhabitants of Jerusalem were carried away to exile and the fiery purification is the judgement on the city. The instructions and prophecy are given in the form of a rhythmic song that might be considered a form of protest music. On another occasion Ezekiel was told to bake bread over a fire fuelled by human dung (Ezek 4), an instruction to which he as a priest who had never broken purity laws objected. God relented and told him to use cow dung instead. This and several other

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<sup>1</sup> The MT repeats the word: *משל אל-בית-המרי משל* – NRSV translates “utter an allegory” but a better translation would be “allegorise an allegory” or “say a saying” or “parableise a parable”.

strange activities by Ezekiel are characterised by Yvonne Sherwood in her Semeia 2000 essay as “prophetic scatology.”

A final example in this brief list is found in a narrative recorded in the book of 1 Kings of a much earlier prophet, Ahijah, who sought out Jeroboam, at the time in charge of forced labour under Solomon. Ahijah stripped off a new garment and tore it into twelve pieces representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and gave ten to Jeroboam with the message that he would rule over ten tribes – this was the impetus for the split in the kingdom that occurred in Solomon’s reign (a tenth century BC leadership spill!) (1 Kgs 11).

So understanding the prophets means understanding the whole communication event as a performance, including symbolic actions, family life, economic transactions as well as their words.

### **Prophets as performers**

When speaking of prophets as performers they might be better described as performance artists than actors in a pre-set drama. Marvin Carlson describes an interest in performance art as “developing the expressive qualities of the body” (2004:110). The message of prophets is frequently portrayed through their own bodies and personalities: and the examples that I have given show this is often with profound personal effect. One of the common Hebrew words for a prophetic oracle, the word *מַשָּׁר*, *mašš’* can also mean “burden,” giving the impression that the prophet is bearing a physical load when presenting and embodying the word of God. Unlike the wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible, the prophet does not choose which words to use (cf. Prov 25.11 – “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver”) but is governed by the word they are compelled to give. Moreover, they do not just say the word, they do the word. Like performance artists who aim for sensation (Sherwood 2006:1) or the destruction of convention (Giesen 2006:316), prophets seem to have an aim of shocking their audience. Frequently their acts are contrary to socially acceptable behaviour, social convention, religious laws and sensibilities. In this regard the prophets allow themselves to become extremely vulnerable: open to ridicule, accusations, rejection and dismissal of their message. Indeed, they were often told to expect such rejection, and at times were imprisoned or physically punished by the community they were seeking to influence.

The descriptions of the visionary experiences of a number of prophets have led some to suggest that prophets were psychologically disturbed. Passages such as Ezekiel 3, Isaiah 6 and Habakkuk 3 show that several individuals were rendered speechless and paralysed by their encounter with God. Strange, often anti-social behaviour, unwelcome and at times shocking speech, physical manifestations such as fit-like symptoms and descriptions of wild hallucinatory style visions have given rise to such this suggestion. But it certainly doesn’t cover all prophetic action, and I’m more convinced by David Stacey’s more measured suggestion that prophets were persons of “rare mental intensity” so taken up with their message that they manifested it in their own bodies (1990:172).

## Isaiah

Let me remind you of another prophetic performance that Stacey describes as “one of the most celebrated prophetic dramas” although I don’t think I have ever heard a sermon on this passage. When the Assyrian Empire was threatening the Fertile Crescent, the prophet Isaiah was commanded by God to remove his clothes and sandals and preach naked for three years as a dramatic sign of the conquest of Egypt by Assyria. It was common practice in those days for political prisoners who were being led away captive to be stripped naked as a sign of humiliation. As the Biblical writer puts it: “with buttocks exposed” (Isa 20:4). By prophesying in the same condition, Isaiah would be drawing extra attention to the event. It is hard to not interpret such symbolic action as provocative, since the prophet too would be undergoing the humiliation and shame experienced by political captives, but doing it of his own free will. Embodiment was taken to such a degree that prophets were prepared to surrender their own pride and dignity for the sake of their message. They often had to shock a complacent audience with a message that was not welcome and would be preferably ignored except for the provocative action. But whether it resulted in conversion or scorn cannot always be determined. It is notable that in the Biblical texts so-called “false prophets” are usually those who were speaking a word that was in favour of the policies or practices of the day.

### **Does such prophetic action have a place today?**

Before addressing this question of whether such prophetic action has a place in the public sphere today it is important to address prior issues of historical context and literary representation. Much debate surrounds the questions of the prophetic characters and roles in the Hebrew Bible. Were they loners acting as isolated individuals or did they have more widespread community support (bands of disciples and the like)? How closely tied to the cult were they? Does a historical figure underlie prophetic traditions or are they merely *personas* created by scribes of later eras? How sure can we be that prophets did in reality what is described in their books? Given the uncertainty of all of these issues, are we justified in using Biblical traditions as templates for our own action?

If, on the other hand, we approach the prophetic literature from a literary rather than historical viewpoint we might ask whether it matters if a historical actuality underlies the prophetic traditions. These are stories that have stood up to the test of time and rather than subject them to the scrutiny of the ‘quest for the historical prophet,’ we can let them speak on several levels through the layers of meaning imbued in their canonical preservation and transmission. They are stories that can continue to inspire and motivate our faithful communities. Let me give just one reasonably contemporary example:

### **Mike Riddell’s story**

New Zealander Mike Riddell is an ordained minister who spent some formative years as I did in a Baptist theological college where the teaching embraced the philosophy that the Bible should be in one hand and the newspaper in the other (Karl Barth, *Time Magazine* article,

May 31, 1963). Around twenty years ago Mike Riddell was in ministry in Auckland and was involved in a campaign trying to prevent the city council from selling off inner city rental stock, occupied by low-income tenants including psychiatric patients. The campaign followed all the usual strategies of printing posters, organising petitions, writing letters and submissions, attending Council meetings and making representation on behalf of the tenants. At the final meeting where a decision would be made Mike could see that the Councillors had already made up their minds to sell. This is how he describes his reaction:

In my despair, I was overcome by divine madness. Without forethought, and to the surprise of the gathered dignitaries, I leapt into the centre of the circled benches and began to disrobe. As I removed my clothes, words came to me. I said to the Councillors that this was what they were doing to the poor: removing what little dignity they had left and leaving them naked and vulnerable. You think that nobody is watching, I told them, but God is watching, and you are accountable for your decision.

Standing in his boxers he wasn't sure what to do next, so much to everyone's relief the mayor called a break for a cup of tea. The council did make the decision to sell the properties that day, but due to the publicity that resulted did not act on the decision for another seven years. In a passage reflecting on the experience, Mike says:

In some ways, my confrontation of the ruling powers with my own vulnerability was a more effective means of achieving change than all of our more conventional democratic attempts.<sup>2</sup>

## Publicly performing God's word

This story well illustrates a characteristic of prophets that is a consciousness of speaking "God's word" rather than their own word. Yvonne Sherwood speaks about this in an article on prophetic performance art:

Crazy actions and crazy language are prophetic *special effects* designed to create the very *special effect* of the super-natural para-normal, *das Heilige*, which so frequently finds its expression – as Other – through the *unnatural, abnormal*. Unlike Wisdom, prophecy claims to be the direct word of God, and prophetic language and prophetic bodies reel in the attempt to create a sense of words that, by definition, are not our words, and of actions that, by definition, are not "our" own (Sherwood 2006:1.2, author's italics).

There are, of course, contemporary stories of prophetic figures that claim to speak God's word but are observed with great unease by the majority of the Christian church. Here in Australia one such figure is Danny Nalliah – an Assemblies of God pastor who heads up "Catch the Fire Ministries". Amongst his "prophetic" claims made public was a conviction that Victoria's 2009 Black Saturday bushfires were a "consequence" of decriminalisation of abortion in 2008. He has also had convictions about our political leaders – here are some words from his blog on the web:

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations received in email correspondence with Mike Riddell, but they can be found in his publication *Sacred Journey - Spiritual Wisdom for Times of Transition* (SPCK, 2010).

## Prophets as Public Performers

Now I wish to take you back to Federal election in 2007 when God gave me a clear prophetic word that Kevin Rudd was not God's man for Australia. If we Christians had PRAYED & ACTED IN UNITY, we would have been given a coalition government once again with John Howard & Peter Costello as our leaders....

Unfortunately, from day number one when Rudd came on the scene I knew he was not fair-dinkum. A few months after he was elected I had a vision at one of our weekly intercessory prayer meetings, that Julia Gillard came behind Rudd and stuck a knife in his back and Rudd fell to the ground, then she took over the government. Immediately I shared the vision with my team and we prayed about it.

The blog was written in 2010 not long after a leadership spill in the Labor Party which resulted in the incumbent Prime Minister Kevin Rudd being replaced by his deputy Julia Gillard as leader of the party. One reader's response to the blog was "Well said Danny! You are a true prophet of God!"

I know that I, and I suspect most listening today, would regard Mike Riddell's actions and words as prophetic and Danny Nalliah's as misguided. One criterion for making this judgement is that Nalliah tends to be a fore-teller in the popular sense of the word prophet (although sometimes, quite conveniently, in retrospect), whereas the more accurate role that emerges from the prophetic literature is that of truth-teller: even, and most especially, when the truth is against the popular action and opinion of the day.

Let me say in the context of this public theology consultation that there *is* a place for a discussion of a Christian's role in the mainstream political processes, including Christian politicians, advisors, bureaucrats and prayer networks.

But it seems to me that a discussion of prophetic action inspired by our Biblical heritage suggests there is also a place for prophetic performance in the liminal sphere – on the margins of socially dominant culture. Such performance can be manifest in a range of ways.

Over the last five years I have had the privilege of being associated with the annual "Voices for Justice" campaign organised by Micah Challenge in which up to 300 participants meet in Canberra for four days – two days of preparation, prayer and reflection and two days of meetings with Parliamentarians to advocate for the Millennium Development Goals. Each year public events have been held to present the message and advocate on behalf of the poor – events that included art exhibitions, public rallies, bike rides, a 5<sup>th</sup> birthday party in Parliament House with balloons and lolly bags to highlight the number of children globally who do not reach their fifth year. This year included a "Robin Hood tax"<sup>3</sup> demonstration with several Greenwood clad advocates and there was a "Signature Event" in which Wilberforce's action against slavery was evoked as a giant scroll was unrolled across the floor of the Great Hall and politicians were invited to add their signatures to those of 112,000 other Australians who are committed to fighting poverty. Voices for Justice bases its action on the biblical principle of God's preferential option for the poor. One participant,

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<sup>3</sup> A tax on financial transactions which then would be redistributed to the poor.

reflecting on the “Signature event,” wrote “it was Tony Abbott who made the most profound comment of the morning when he said, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that we are nags and that people in power need nags like us to keep them accountable. Whether he intended it or not, his words described our prophetic engagement with the powers of the day.”

Despite their colourful and attention grabbing nature, the Voices for Justice events at Parliament House have tended to stay within the parameters of legality and decorum, probably falling short of the shock of some of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. This type of prophetic performance may be better illustrated by small groups such as the Bonhoeffer Four – a group of peacemakers from Victoria who have embodied their convictions by illegally trespassing and disrupting war training exercises at the Swan Island military base (<http://indymedia.org.au/keywords/bonhoeffer-4>),<sup>4</sup> inspired by Isaiah 2.4/Micah 4.3 (“they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, nor shall they train for war any more”), or individuals such as Rachel Griffiths whose protest at the opening of the Crown Casino in Melbourne in 1997 evoked memories of the temple-clearing incident as well as explicit allusions to a suffering Jesus when she stepped out of a limousine amongst arrivals of other dignitaries wearing only a bloody “crown of thorns” and a loin cloth while the child with her tossed coins on the ground. (Stewart 2006). It is such daring and provocative action that continues the tradition of Biblical prophets in public performances impelled by God’s word. Such “alliances between the Bible and the margins” (Sherwood 2006:1.3) may better enact the shocking theology of prophetic performers.

## Conclusion

Exposure – whether by disrobing or inviting censure from others – will always attract attention. What makes such performance prophetic? One criterion would be the motivation for such action. If it is *only* sensationalism it remains performance for its own sake. If there is an aim to expose truth and justice it could be named prophetic. Can the performances of Biblical prophets compelled to risk dignity and social acceptance in their presentation of a message from God continue to be one of the sources of inspiration for those engaged in public theology today?

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<sup>4</sup> See also reports of Aotearoa Ploughshare members, including a Pax Christi member, Fr Peter Murnane, who had been charged with intentionally damaging government property with criminal intent after they destroyed a section of a spy-satellite dish in 2008 being used for the US led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They were acquitted in March 2010, but ramifications may include tightening of legislature to prevent future demonstrations of this nature. (Source: Pax Christi International, Asia Pacific News June 2010)



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