Benefits of Performance for Translation

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Abstract

Biblical Performance Criticism is a bridge between the origins of the biblical text and the contemporary audience for whom the performer performs. A performance involves memorizing or internalizing a portion of Scripture, then acting it out with gestures and emotion in front of an audience of any size. Following the performance, the performer and audience discuss various aspects of the performance: what the text means, how well the text was understood, how the performance can be improved, what insights were gained from the performance, etc. Biblical Performance Criticism can aid the translation process by helping to discover key terms, checking the translation, educating participants about the text, and by helping the translator better understand how the text was received by the participants.

Key words: Performance, Biblical Performance Criticism, orality, scripture engagement, translation, community exegesis

Introduction

Almost 80% of people in the world function as oral learners, but the majority of Bible Translation work presupposes literacy. By utilizing Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC), oral learners can access the text of the Bible more quickly and engage with the Scriptures more meaningfully. Also, this engagement with the text can improve translation efforts already happening in the language. The entire process of BPC—exegesis, translation, performance, and discussion—offers innovative ways of learning about and engaging the biblical text.

A biblical "performance" means memorizing or internalizing a portion of Scripture, then acting it out with gestures and emotions in front of an audience of any size. As opposed to reading the passage out loud, the performer is intimately familiar with the text and uses his or her body and voice to express various emotions and actions within the text. Following the performance, the performer and audience discuss various aspects of the performance: what the text means, how well the text was understood, how the performance can be improved, what insights were gained from the performance, etc.

Benefits

The potential benefits of utilizing Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) are myriad. BPC helps people engage with Scripture in significant ways. Wayne Dye's article, "The Eight Conditions of Scripture Engagement," examines various conditions that factor into meaningful engagement with the Biblical text. Dye notes, "When all eight conditions are met, good Scripture engagement is highly likely" (2009: 91).

BPC can address seven of Dye's eight conditions. *Condition 1: Appropriate Language* states that people can interact with the Scripture in the language that speaks strongest to them (Dye 2009:

92). Performances can be done in the local language and have a greater impact among minority speakers. In addition, a text can be performed in related dialects and languages to discuss translation options, e.g. whether a word is understandable in both dialects/languages, or if a word has an entirely different meaning in different areas.

Regarding *Condition 2: Acceptable Translation*, BPC can help craft an acceptable translation. Because of the fluidity of the performance, different terms can be used during different performances. Discussions after the performances can be used to help define and select key terms. Participants can have more ownership over the translation if they are actively engaged in the post-performance discussion.

Condition 3: Accessible Forms aligns with how a majority of the world functions in oral cultures. Interacting with the Scriptures in an oral performance allows oral cultures a way to access these texts without literacy. All people are oral learners, even those of us in the West. Even highly literate participants can gain new insights from a performance. Participants can find new ways of engaging with the text.

Condition 4: Background Knowledge is the main way BPC can be used as a teaching tool. Footnotes and pictures aid a written translation, but people must be taught how to use footnotes and pictures must be checked to make sure they are culturally appropriate. Additionally, audio Bible listeners do not have the luxury of footnotes or pictures. Performances, on the other hand, can help fill in unknown information for the people. During a performance, the performer has the ability to talk about the world of the Bible, in describing the architecture of the first century CE, for instance. When the people hear the story of the paralytic lowered through the roof from the Gospel of Mark chapter 2, they can picture what is happening more accurately. For performance audiences, Maxey notes that BPC can also help with teaching correct doctrine. "Such context-building [i.e. background knowledge] at times provides information that is lacking by the audience or steers them away from false inferences based on false assumptions – especially when there is potential religious-cultural dissonance between the biblical scenario and local culture" (2009: 178). Post-performance discussions can also be utilized to help teach background knowledge. Questions can be asked to determine to what degree people comprehended the text. The audience is also free to ask questions about the performance to fill in any gaps in knowledge.

Condition 5: Availability, I take in a different direction. Dye cites distribution systems and obtaining copies of the text as ways to access the Scriptures (2009: 94). I think there is potential for availability after a performance by teaching the audience the story. Then the audience can become performers of the story, making the story quickly available to more people, including oral preference learners. In *Story Journey*, Thomas Boomershine references a way to teach people oral stories through an activity called "lion hunt." During lion hunt, while the leader tells a story, "the group says and does everything that the leader says and does, in immediate response" (1988: 54). In this way, the people learn the story and can recall it at a later time; thereby, the Scriptures become available for the community.

Condition 6: Spiritual Hunger is closely tied with evangelism. BPC can be used as a tool to evangelize. Much like *Condition 5: Availability*, after people learn the story, then they can tell the story to others, helping to satisfy one another's spiritual hunger. Dye cites "Good News Encounters" as "small episodes in daily life when God or the Bible are seen to meet a felt need"

(2009: 95). If people have been engaged with the text through BPC (or other methods), they are able to recall Bible stories well and have a productive Good News Encounter.

Finally, *Condition 8: Partnership* is the glue that holds all the other conditions together. If the host community does not support translation efforts, no work can be done effectively. As Dye states, "Communities should be owners of the translation process" (2009: 96). If a community desires a written translation and despises the thought of audio Bibles or other oral/aural materials, then they should not be pressed into crafting oral/aural materials. On the other hand, if the community is open to trying BPC, great strides could be made in many of the other conditions, thereby helping the community engage with Scripture in a more meaningful manner.

Another benefit of BPC is the communal nature of the performance event. A performance needs both a performer and audience, even if that audience is only one person. The community gathers to hear the Scripture, and the group is transformed through the shared stories. The stories that are told to the group can become the group's stories. James Maxey states, "As the community comes together in performance, their identity is reinforced. At the same time, this identity is shifting as the community interacts with the biblical message" (2009: 191). As people interact with the biblical text, they are being transformed, as a community.

BPC engages the whole body for both the performer and the audience. The performer is the living embodiment of the text: "The performer is present in body with voice, sounds, movements, gestures, proximity, appearance, and context. The audience is present and experiencing all of these dimensions along with the reactions of others in the audience. Performance is word-became-flesh in an event of embodied immediacy" (Rhoads 2010: 178). With many of the senses in play, the audience is engaged in the performance; and the text becomes real and living for the audience.

The performance and discussion of stories helps the community understand the stories. Stories have been used for millennia to help people identify with their community. As the community more fully comprehends the stories, they become transformed by these stories. As the community is transformed by the Bible, stories from the Bible become the group's stories. They begin to participate in the Kingdom of God. The people have ownership over these stories and are transformed into the people of God.

Another benefit is how BPC utilizes media with which people are already familiar. There is no need on the people's part to learn new technology, reading or otherwise. BPC is beneficial in this way because of its simplicity. The translator needs to be familiar with how stories are told in the culture. Then the translator finds an appropriate story method for the biblical story to be conveyed. Biblical stories can then be told any time people are gathered—the marketplace, church, at home, or while working.

A Research Tool

David Rhoads acknowledges various "reasons to employ performance as a tool of research" (2010: 168). First, "performance may help us to investigate the range of meaning potential for a given composition" (2010: 168). Performances are fluid; no two performances are ever the same. Even if the same performer performs for the same audience, there are innumerable variations

among the performer, audience, and performance. Furthermore, performing for people of various social strata draws out many different conclusions. The poor and disenfranchised will often experience a performance very differently from the rich and powerful.

Second, "performance may help us to explore the potential rhetorical impacts upon ancient audiences" (Rhoads 2010: 168). The various rhetorical effects employed in Scripture advocate for an emotional response from the audience (Shiner 2003: 57). Through performance, performers and audience members may find or experience new applications done in the 21st century that will help us better understand the intent of the passage.

Third, "performance may help us to recover oral features of the text and performance dynamics to which we might not otherwise have access" (Rhoads 2010: 169). Silently reading a text to oneself does not easily bring out the oral features of a text. Crafting and participating in a performance event bring to the forefront the oral features and performance dynamics of which Rhoads speaks. Recent biblical scholarship has focused on the nuances of the text itself, not the aural and visual aspects of a performance. But with performance, aural features and physical actions become part of the world of the text.

Finally, Rhoads states, "Performance may help us to restore the emotive dimensions to the text" (2010: 169). The text of the Bible is meant to draw an emotional response from the audience. Whitney Shiner notes how performers in the ancient Mediterranean world "recognized that emotional appeals are extremely important in the shaping of opinion" (2003: 57). Appealing to emotions can help people connect with the biblical text in a new way, and performance creates a space for that to happen.

Current Practice

The beauty of BPC is that many translators and pastors are already doing similar activities. I mentioned BPC to a translator in Pioneer Bible Translators, and he was intrigued by what BPC could offer. I later heard him describe how he presented the Scriptures in a storytelling context. I was surprised, because what he described was so similar to BPC; I had just given him a name for something he was already doing. I have no doubt that other translators and pastors are in a similar place. BPC is not something to be "tacked on" to other methods, but rather a strategy for holistically examining and engaging with the Scriptures.

There are various ways to incorporate BPC into what translators are already doing. James Maxey offers two options for engaging the text. In his first method, Maxey proposes a "communal encounter of the biblical composition through performance" (2009: 143). In this application, participants take turns being the performer, and collectively they are the audience for other performers. Before performing, participants discuss the social-historical context of the texts, examine the orality present in the text, and talk over performance issues. The group also analyzes the local performance style. After the group watches performances, "there would be time…to discuss the rhetorical effects, the insights gained, and the communication challenges of the performance. These discussions would inform other performances as the original group performed these compositions in other settings" (Maxey 2009: 143).

A second approach Maxey champions is the apprenticeship model. In a culture that is more steeped in oral tradition, creating a script for a performance may be out of the question. In the apprenticeship model, future performers learn the text from an experienced mentor. Those audience members then perform the text. As Maxey notes, "The handing on of oral tradition in biblical performances would replicate the already established process of learning and the passing on of traditions" (2009: 164). He further suggests that the performances can be video recorded in place of face-to-face contact with the mentor (2009: 164).

Karlik offers a different method. The translation team with which her husband worked were teachers and preachers in their local communities. After spending the morning studying and drafting a passage, the national translators "go out in the evenings to village churches where they would teach or preach on the passage; and feedback on the way home brought about revisions" (Karlik 2012: 182). While Karlik's essay goes in a different direction than performance, her description of how these translators disseminate the text to their communities could be useful for translators. From my personal experience in Tanzania, many national translators are also pastors and teachers. If these pastors and teachers were taught the skills needed to engage in BPC, more people would be able to engage with the Scriptures in culturally appropriate ways.

Translators could also discuss the possibility of creating a lectionarium. As de Vries states, this is a collection of "passages and texts that play a key role in the life of the young churches" (2012: 87). Preachers and teachers become so familiar with this collection of texts that they internalize them. The audience will also hear these texts repeatedly and eventually "memorize and internalize the meanings and intentions of the biblical texts" (Vries 2012: 87). More texts can be incorporated into the community as the texts are internalized. This is just one method to consider in order to help host communities become familiar with the biblical text.

Biblical Performance Criticism and Oral Bible Translation go hand in hand. By utilizing software such as Render[1] alongside BPC, translation teams can work out various translation issues while attending to the needs of the oral community. As Rhoads points out, "The act of translating for oral performance itself is a discipline that leads one to notice aspects of the text often overlooked—repetition, word associations, rhyme and rhythm, historical presents, word order, verbal threads, alliteration, and so on" (Rhoads 2006: 171). Other features, such as honorifics, can be worked out in BPC to craft a more natural translation.

Hearing and telling Bible stories out loud can also lead to finding moments of contrast. For example, the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:26-30 replies to Jesus in a surprising manner. Jesus's reaction can be conveyed in a variety of ways through BPC. Translation teams may also be able to hear conflict or negotiation not apparent in the reading of the text. For example, when I performed Mark 5:1-20 for a group, one participant commented on how the dialogue between Jesus and the demoniac seemed more like a transaction. That aspect may not have been apparent to her without seeing the performance.

Non-verbal communication can be utilized through performance to draw out various interpretations. Non-verbal communication can help communicate compassion, surprise, sadness, or a whole host of emotion not found in the written text. Various non-verbal cues can be used to

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[1] https://www.faithcomesbyhearing.com/audio-bibles/render

test out what is the best way to translate and perform passages. Perhaps a translation team could even find better phrasing for a passage through the use of dramatic non-verbal communication.

In the same vein as non-verbal communication, tone and subtext can become integral parts of performance. A story performed at different times with different attitudes or tones can drastically change the performance; for example, compassion could be changed to sarcasm. Wendland states, "By altering such characteristics as the volume, stress, tempo, pitch, pause length and spacing, vowel color, and other paralinguistic variables, one can appreciably alter or modify the functional import and pragmatic attitude of a certain utterance" (2013: 189). Similarly, subtext must be taken into account as well. Subtext is "the message that the performer gives in the way a line is delivered" (Rhoads 2006: 176). As Rhoads notes, "There is no way to do a performance without conveying a subtext message with each and every line, no matter how badly done or ill-informed it is" (2006: 177). The act of performing or reading the text out loud requires that subtext be addressed. By thinking about these aspects while translating, we may become aware of "hitherto unnoticed dimensions of the biblical texts" (Rhoads 2006: 173).

I think BPC in the translation process can begin with the performance of pericopes, but should move to performing entire books. Not only is performing entire books how the first Christians experienced their faith texts, but as Rhoads argues, "I myself do not find it possible to understand or convey the full meaning or the overall rhetorical impact of a text without performing it in its entirety" (2010: 172). Scholarship has dissected the biblical text, but with performance, the emotional impact of the Scriptures can be re-experienced. Learning the entirety of a book can bring transformation in people's lives and the life of the host community, as discussed below.

One area where BPC can have immediate impact is to utilize it during the checking of texts. Another Pioneer Bible missionary routinely has national translators act out portions of text that are confusing, as a form of testing. Through this process the team has been able to clarify passages of Scripture. For example, the team initially thought the temple curtain was ripped from side to side instead of top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). The Pioneer Bible translator asked one of the national translators to pretend to walk around this curtain. The translation team then discovered their error when the national translator bent over to avoid the imaginary curtain, instead of walking through it.

As can be seen from this example, testing in oral majority contexts already has some similarities to BPC; but the process of BPC can help create a better dialogue about the text. Every performance and discussion I did resulted in my learning something new. After the first two performances, I needed to study the text and surrounding texts more. In utilizing BPC, the translator will become more knowledgeable about the passage and will need to do more research before performing it again.

As mentioned above, BPC can also be used as a teaching tool. My own performance of the scripture with group discussion afterward opened up a dialogue where people learned so much more about the biblical text than they would have by just silently reading to themselves. I was able to answer questions for people; participants benefited from insights that others in the group had; I added information into the text to aid people's understanding of the story; and people became more familiar with the text. Through this method, the community is able to participate in group Bible studies which will help them learn more and engage more fully with the text.

Maxey notes how some of the Vuté people composed songs based on BPC performances. Performances can help people hear the Scriptures and become inspired to craft songs in the local style. The Vuté songs had to fulfill two criteria: "the local style of music must be respected in the compositions; [and] the lyrics these songs are to follow closely the already translated texts, with limited creative licensing for revision" (Maxey 2009: 189). During BPC, local artists could be motivated to create culturally appropriate pieces of art for the community. Or a workshop could be conducted where the community performs pericopes from the Bible and pieces of art are produced within the workshop. BPC can lend itself to other forms of artistry easily.

BPC can also be utilized in minority language contexts through the testing of words and phrases. Performances could be repeated for the same group with different words used in each performance. The translator can then open up a dialogue about word use and the meaning of certain words. New discoveries about the language could result. A similar encounter happened in my first performance of Mark 5:1-20. One participant had often heard "steep bank" and was distracted by my use of "cliff." He eventually used the word "cliff" when describing the scene back to me. This shows how the words we use in performance can influence our audiences.

Also, in minority language contexts with various dialects or chaining, performances could be adapted for each dialect. Discussions could be based on the comprehension of the dialect. Translators can check to see if certain dialectical variations are understandable in other groups. While this can also be done in writing, the fluidity of performance allows the translator to do these checks in real time with various performances.

One caution regarding this method is the need for sensitivity in the host community. BPC is not a magic bullet. There are places and contexts where BPC will not be an effective tool, such as language groups who only want a written translation because of the prestige it brings or language groups who regard exclusively oral translation strategies as marginalization. And while BPC is a great tool to utilize in oral majority contexts, some oral majority contexts may find the method patronizing or a form of soft racism because of past efforts that have left cultures "in a pre-modern, non-progressive state" (Perry 2016: 160). The host community must be consulted regarding translation efforts. If the host community perceives BPC as a "continuation of colonial condescension" (Perry 2016: 160) or has no desire for oral/aural materials, then perhaps the method needs to be rethought. But by and large, I am confident that by utilizing BPC in the translation process, our translations can become richer.

Impact

Not only is BPC useful in the translation process, but it can also have an impact in the host community. The people who are engaged in the translation process will have local ownership of the text. Through performance and discussion of the texts, the people will learn more about the text, offer their own community exegesis, and be transformed by the texts. Wendland summarizes this idea:

> A performance-based methodology can also serve another vital function, namely, to get the translation's 'host community' more actively involved in the project from the very

beginning, while the first texts are being drafted, rather than at the very end, as happens all too often. Widespread public 'acceptability' (transferred then to actual use) is the ultimate goal of any translation, and the sooner that the primary client audience can become meaningfully 'engaged' in the process of evaluating and improving the team's drafts, the more effective the project will be in terms of accomplishing its communicative intentions (2013: 72-73).

Performance engages the community at large, not just the individual. Those who hear a performance are actively engaged in the storytelling. As Maxey states, "Audiences are actively participating in the performance, influencing the performer, responding to the performer – verbally and nonverbally – at times joining in the role of performer themselves" (2009: 136). As a majority print culture, we are not used to this participation. "In contrast with modern readers, who read to gather information, hearers of oral performance participate in the narrative" (Horsley 2001: 75). Those who are engaged in performance can eventually be transformed by it.

The performances I conducted were transformative for the groups. Each group had at least one comment that amounted to "I wish I heard the text like this all the time!" All the groups were highly literate; yet these people steeped in print culture gained so much from a single performance. Shiner writes about that transformative power: "The performance of the Gospel makes Jesus powerfully present … The Gospel event embodying the life and death of Jesus is transformative. Transformative because it lifts me out of ordinary existence. It creates a new reality" (Shiner 2003: 192-3). Performing the Gospel story has the potential to be a transformative experience no matter the social situation of those involved.

Stories have been used for millennia to help people identify as a community. Stories utilized in the Judeo-Christian tradition have been used for the same purpose: to instill identity among adherents. As Hearon states, "Stories, therefore, provided an effective way to offer guidance, instill values, and shape attitudes" (2009: 32). Stories have the power not only to offer a sense of identity to a group; there is also a transformative aspect to stories. "Stories invite listeners to enter the world of the story, to identify with the characters, and be transformed with them or by them" (Hearon 2009: 32).

In whatever way one describes this event, whether it be 'performance' or 'storytelling,' there is a distinctly social nature to it. There can be no spoken story without an audience. As Hearon notes, "Storytelling is fundamentally a social activity" (Hearon 2009: 33). The texts of our faith were meant to be heard in community. Through performance, people are transformed because they are hearing the stories. This hearing, in turn, brings about transformation in the community as they begin to identify with the stories of their faith.

Performance is a powerful form of incarnational ministry. Performers embody the words of their faith. The community gathered around transforms their own identity into the one performed. As Rhoads states, "The Bible becomes embodied in the community in the performance event—by performance, by response, by memory. Rather than a book, the performer and audience become the medium" (2010: 191).

BPC has the potential to powerfully transform our translation efforts. People can become more fully engaged with the Biblical text through BPC. BPC can be utilized as a tool for researching

the original intent of a passage and for checking/testing the translation. BPC has the potential to be used as a teaching tool to increase the Biblical literacy of any group of people, majority oral or majority literate. BPC helps create local ownership over the text as people take on the performance themselves.

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