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## The Art of Biblical Performance

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# Abstract

For centuries the Bible's essential identity as a book has been taken for granted as a fundamental truth by scholars and lay people alike. Over the last century or so the oral transmission of the biblical material has been researched and advanced with great rigor, and today many scholars accept the oral origins of the Hebrew Bible. However, for many of these scholars their acceptance seems to be primarily intellectual as opposed to practical, for though they acknowledge orality, they continue to treat the received text as *a text*. In other words, orality has not yet been incorporated at the *methodological* level. The present study attempts to take a step toward rectifying that oversight. For example, this study argues that the cultural realities of ancient Israel suggest that the art practiced by the biblical composers was not of an essentially literary character, but rather of a *dramatic* character, which prioritized performance. It argues that the narrative texts contained in the Hebrew Bible are more akin to dramatic scripts than a purely literary form of writing. In other words, the *textual* character of the biblical texts (specifically the narratives) is secondary, their literary quality penultimate. The ancient crafts of *drama* and *performance* are evident in the texts we receive. Further, they are not intended to be read silently in one's head but enacted through one's body and voice in space and time before a gathered audience. They are most at home not on the page but on the stage. A fuller understanding of Israel's performance tradition—the art of biblical performance—will lead to a greater appreciation of Israel's dramatic and theological achievement.

The study is divided into two parts. Part 1 (Chapters 1–3) lays the theoretical foundation upon which biblical performance criticism is built. These chapters combine orality studies, cultural anthropology, and performance studies with biblical studies in order to revisit the genre of the narratives and articulate an emerging methodology that enables the scholar to interpret them in ways that resonate with their dramatic character. This methodology is called biblical performance criticism. Part 2 (Chapters 4–6) demonstrates the fruit of biblical performance criticism by applying it to three dramas in the Elisha cycle in 2 Kings: the Widow's Oil (4:1–7), the Healing of Naaman and the Downfall of Gehazi (2 Kings 5), and the Bands of Aram (2 Kings 6:8–23).