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Performing the Torah: The Rhetorical Function of the Pentateuch in the Second Temple Period¹

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Part I

The Torah comes equipped with instructions for its own performance. In Deuteronomy 31, Moses instructs the Levites to "read this law before all Israel in their hearing" every seven years at Succoth (Deut 31:9-11). Later biblical books portray this occurring on at least three occasions: Joshua reads "all the words of the law" to the people after crossing the Jordan and conquering Jericho and Ai (Josh 8:34-35); King Josiah has the law, recently rediscovered, read before the people at Passover (2 Kgs 22-23); and Ezra reads and his "book of the law of Moses" and has the Levites interpret it to the assembled Jerusalemites of the Persian period (Neh 8). So the Bible both stipulates and models the performance of the text of Torah in a particular way: as an oral reading of the entire document to all the people of Israel.

It is surprising therefore to notice that, since Ezra, the Torah has rarely been performed in this way. We have virtually no information about Jewish reading practices until the late Second Temple period, and then only fragmentary glimpses. But by rabbinic times if not earlier, the division of the Torah into weekly readings (*parashot*) had become conventional, so that the entire document would be read sequentially during *Shabbat* services over one year (three years in some traditions). In this modified form, public reading and recitation of Torah and other scriptures became characteristic of the worship traditions of both Judaism and Christianity.

The Torah contains other instructions for its performance by individuals and families. Deuteronomy 6 mandates that the laws be memorized ("keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" v 6) and recited to children and discussed daily (v 7). A king must read from Torah daily (17:19). Unlike the public readings mandated in Deuteronomy 31, no other biblical text narrates such private performances, though the ideal of torah-study is reflected in the Psalms (Ps. 1:2). Torah study, however, became a mark of religious authority and prestige by the later Second Temple period, already reflected in the depiction of Ezra as "skilled in the law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6).

From the fact that Deuteronomy prescribes both public and private performances, I conclude that this book, and likely the rest of the Pentateuch as well, was written primarily for such uses. That is, of course, hardly an innovative conclusion. Almost all ancient literature was written to be read aloud and usually to an audience. So Deuteronomy's mandates only confirm what we should expect anyway.

But that confirmation is valuable for grounding our analyses of the text and provides a check on our exegetical ingenuity as interpreters. We should always ask: Would an audience, or a savant memorizing the text devotionally, notice the patterns that we think we've discovered by poring over the written text (or computer generated comparisons of it)? If not, there is every reason to suspect that we may be over-analyzing the text. In light of these kinds of questions, refrains and repetitive patterns should be given

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greater prominence in interpretation than they have usually received in Pentateuchal studies. Some other features of the Pentateuch that are discernible to textual scholars lose credibility if they would not be recognizable to hearers or, at least, sages in their public or private performances.

I have used such considerations to develop a rhetorical analysis of the Pentateuch as a whole (1999) and am applying them in considerably more detail to the book of Leviticus (2007; 2013). But today I want to consider with you the methodological implications of the diversity of performance practices that I have just described. On the one hand, Deuteronomy's mandates for performance and the evidence for performance practices in antiquity confirm Carr's view that elite enculturation by reading and memorizing classic texts shaped the contents of the biblical canon (2005). They also confirm the longstanding view that Israel's traditions aim for a broad popular audience.

The discrepancy, however, between Deuteronomy's mandates for mass readings of the entire text and the standard liturgical practices of synagogues and churches over the past two millennia sounds a cautionary note. If liturgical performance has not been constrained by the text's explicit instructions, we cannot assume that correctly divining the performance intended by a text's composers and writers will in any way describe the actual performances it has received. The subdivision of the Pentateuch into fifty-two weekly portions does not correspond at all well with its literary shape. Even less does the juxtaposition of the Torah portions with weekly *haftorah* readings from the prophets reflect the original intentions of any of their authors. Christian reading practices take us even further afield: now it is a Gospel, not Torah, which is read sequentially through at least part of the liturgical year, accompanied by only selected short portions from throughout the Old Testament. The lectionaries omit much of the Pentateuch altogether.

Commentators have long assumed that this lack of compliance with the directives of Deuteronomy 31 was driven by practical necessity: the Pentateuch, much less the whole Tanak or Christian Bible, grew too large to be read at one time. Though this sounds like common sense, it defies the experiences of many ancient and modern religious traditions. The audiences at the Athenian Dionysia festival viewed twelve to sixteen five-act plays by three or four different playwrights in a period of one week. Modern Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus frequently perform large scriptures (the Qur'an, the Guru Granth, the Ramayana) in their entirety, frequently from memory. Occasionally, the Bible too is performed orally in its entirety: in the USA, a group has been staging such a reading of the whole Christian (Protestant) Bible in Washington D.C. as a prelude to the National Day of Prayer every year since 1990. There are no practical reasons for failing to read the Torah or the Tanak or the Christian Bible in their entirety in public: Jews and Christians have simply felt no particular compunction to do so, despite Deuteronomy 31.

Conclusion #1: Thus performance has not been constrained by the text's explicit instructions. As a result, neither explicit performance instructions within the text nor implicit indicators for performance in the form of the texts, can tell us anything about how texts were actually performed and the nature of their reception except where we have explicit and detailed accounts of the performances themselves. At most, performance instructions and any information we may have about normal textual performance patterns at the time of composition *may* give us insights into the intentions of authors in shaping texts in particular ways.

Part 2

I think, however, that attention to performance can be helpful to biblical studies at an entirely different way. The ritual performance of texts plays a major role in elevating their status to the level of scripture.

Twenty years ago, William Graham published his detailed comparative analysis of the performative role and effects of scriptures in multiple traditions. He pointed out that readings, recitations, chants and singing of scriptural texts provide a very important medium through which scriptures are experienced, even in our text-centered age. By engaging the ritual performance of texts, we make an important step towards understanding how they function as scripture.

I have combined Graham's insights on performance with studies of the iconic function of the physical scroll or book to develop a three dimensional model of scriptures (Watts 2006). Alongside the ritualization of the semantic interpretive dimension in preaching and commentary, and the ritualization of the iconic dimension in the decoration, illumination and display of scrolls and codices, the ritualization of the performative dimension elevates ordinary texts to scriptures. Public readings and recitations inspire hearers and, often, the performers themselves by their oral experience of the scriptures. The texts are often chanted or sung, a development that may have been inspired in the Hebrew Bible by the inclusion of hymns and songs not only in the book of Psalms but also inset within narratives of the Torah and the Prophets. Such inset songs were probably sung from the start and their performative influence may have spread to the surrounding narratives, resulting in the *liturgizing* of scriptures in song or chant. But narrative scriptures have tended to elicit dramatic performances as well—performances which often evade the control of clergy and scholars.

This last observation pushes us beyond Graham not only into drama and film, but also into the social transactions conducted through scripture performances. Oral and dramatic performances of scriptures tend to be performed by a wide variety of people. In contrast to the many scholarly and hierarchical controls over scriptural interpretation and to the hierarchical orientation of biblical depictions of Torah readings in Deuteronomy, Joshua, Kings and Ezra, performance leadership tends to be opened up to non-specialists. Consider the great privilege felt by the lay person "called to the Torah", an experience which plays the central role in a child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Consider the routine use of lay readers in Protestant worship services, and the recent call by Catholic bishops to include more women as liturgical readers of scripture (*AFP*, 10/25/2008). Similar practices in Muslim and Sikh communities convince me that religious communities regularly use oral performance as a venue for expanding the ranks of leadership, even as hierarchies often cling to a monopoly over authoritative interpretation. Yohan Yoo (2006) demonstrated that "bible reading services" expanded lay leadership beyond foreign missionaries to Koreans with the result of rapidly Christianizing Korea in the early twentieth century. The inspiring effects of readings, recitations, and dramatizations, together with the expansion of religious leadership that they tend to bring about, explain much of the social power exerted by the Bible in a wide variety of traditions and cultures.

Conclusion #2: Thus for me, attention to performance practices in biblical studies provides two significant benefits. First, noticing that writers of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Kings and Ezra pay explicit attention to oral performance confirms their intention to write for such situations. Performance studies therefore provide a check on our ingenuity for discovering literary patterns by asking: Would an audience hearing the text read, or a savant memorizing the text devotionally, have likely recognized the patterns we discover? Second, performance practices provide an entry point for analyzing the social transactions being conducted with and around scriptures in communities past and present. Biblical scholarship has long recognized the readings by Josiah and Ezra as key events in the developing authority of scripture. Performance studies confirms this by pointing out the continuing vitality of scripture performance traditions. By mandating its own performance, the Torah mandated the conditions, if not the exact means, by which its influence would grow and spread throughout the centuries and across the globe.

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For further discussion of the research upon which this paper is based and for extensive interaction with secondary literature, please see my more fully documented works listed above, especially Watts 1999, 2005, and 2006.