What is Biblical Performance Criticism?

“After about twenty centuries, we are seeking to recover something that has been lost, eclipsed, long gone from the experience of the church and from the experience of Christians—namely, the sacred art of telling biblical traditions. In the first and second centuries, the lively telling of stories took place as an ordinary part of life in the villages and communities and gatherings of early Christians. But since that time, the New Testament writings … have been broken up into small lectionary segments to be read in worship. Furthermore, these segments have been read rather than told from memory.

But here we are in the twenty-first century, seeking together to recover the ethos of storytelling in the first century—and not just individual stories but gospel narratives as a whole. In fact, we think that the gospels, along with the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation, were each originally told in their entirety at one time. The same was true for the letters in the New Testament … because if you heard only part of any one of these you might misunderstand it. Remember, none of these writings were yet in a New Testament canon until a few centuries later. They were not written as Scripture nor were they treated as Scripture when they were first heard … they were stories to be told by memory before the firelight at night or in the market places or in public buildings or house churches.”

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