

# Engaging the Bible with our Whole Selves An Embodied Performance Bible Study Method<sup>1</sup>

*Sarah Agnew*

Welcome to this Embodied Performance approach to studying the Bible. Through this guide, you will be invited to listen to your body, your emotions, and your community. In our fullness of being, we are cognitive, physical, feeling, relational beings, and all these aspects of our being in the world help us to make meaning of it. We have got out of practice with interpreting the Bible with more of ourselves than our minds, though our bodies, emotions, and community are always shaping the meaning we find in and through the Bible. This guide helps you to pay attention again to the various ways you are interpreting the world and the stories you encounter. I hope it will enrich your engagement with our Sacred Story, and with the Holy One revealed through it.

## **What is Embodied Performance Method?**

As introduced in *Embodied Performance: Mutuality, Embrace and the Letter to Rome* (Pickwick, 2020), Embodied Performance Analysis is a rigorous interpretation of the bible by holistic means. Using tools of the body, emotion, and audience, the performer-as-interpreter makes meaning in, of, and through the Bible with the fulness of human interpretive processes.

A full Embodied Performance Analysis of a biblical composition consists of the Performance Interpretation (the live reading or 'telling' of the Bible portion), and a Critical Reflection. In the Critical Reflection, the performer-interpreter discusses the range of physical, emotional, and relational influences on their interpretation, the different methods of interpretation also employed, and the choices made for this particular performance.

Applying this method for a Bible study, participants will be invited to examine their physical, emotional, and relational responses to the Bible as they show us meaning.

## **Why Embodied Performance Method?**

Often we are led to believe that biblical interpretation is carried out by a cognitive mind detached from physical, emotional, and relational aspects of our being. Embodied Performance does not replace cognitive interpretive process, but complements it for a fuller engagement with the Bible. Humans do make meaning through their sensory-motor engagement with the world (and the world of a story), by way of feeling and intuition, and guided by our community and the hopes, stories, and challenges of our time and place.

I hope that as we remind ourselves of our holistic meaning making processes as human beings, you will find Embodied Performance Analysis helpful for developing your meaningful engagement with the Bible, with the fulness of your humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Exclusive draft version for Virtual Festival Gathering 2020 participants. Not for distribution beyond use in participants' own communities of faith.

### **How to use this guide**

I have offered two methods for employing Embodied Performance tools in your group study.

Short play: For shorter biblical portions, you might discuss Body, Emotion, and Audience with brief Critical Reflection to close, in one session.

Long play: For longer biblical portions (of up to a chapter in length), you might take four sessions, reading the portion aloud each time, but discussing Body, Emotion, Audience and your Critical Reflection, in one session each.

Long play would work for short – medium portions; short play is not recommended for portions longer than 25 verses (as a rough guide).

Readers, please refer to 'An Embodied Performance Approach to Biblical Storytelling (and Reading)' as an aide to preparation for this role.

Ideal group size: 6 – 8

### **Helpful resources:**

Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel*  
nbsi.org.

*Embodied Performance. Mutuality, Embrace, and the Letter to Rome.* Sarah Agnew 2020  
<https://sarahagnew.com.au/scholarship/>

## Engaging the Bible with our Whole Selves

### Session outline – Short play

#### Opening meditation

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here with our whole bodies  
bones, muscles, sinews, organs,  
breath, blood, water  
We can feel what clothes us,  
what holds us  
We notice what we may see,  
we notice what we may hear,  
we breathe deep and notice the breath  
in our lungs, and what scents  
we take in, we lick our lips,  
we swallow, we taste life;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here, feeling the light,  
the weight, the shadow  
of stories we encountered in recent  
days, are living, are living,  
we breathe deep and notice  
how we feel today, how we are  
today;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here together, we feel  
the bodies beside us, notice  
the breathing of those with us,  
consider what we know of the stories  
we are each living, side by side.

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
welcomed by Holy One, healed  
by Holy One, whole in Holy One's  
love and life and story.  
We are here for the story,  
as we are, bodies, feelings,  
community.

**Hear the portion aloud**

One person reads the selected portion aloud. It would be helpful for the reader to have read through the portion several times beforehand, and several days in advance. If your practice is to learn and tell biblical stories by heart, that is also a good way to hear it for this study method.

*Listeners* as you hear the portion spoken aloud, note  
 what you saw in the reader  
 what you felt from the reader  
 what you felt yourself  
 what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you listened

*Readers* as you prepare and speak aloud, note  
 where and how your body moved  
 what emotion you felt and / or expressed  
 any connection for your audience as you read – what you saw, heard, from them  
 what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you spoke

**Discussion prompts***Body*

What did the body of the reader seem to say?  
 Did it support or contradict the words?  
 What meaning do you draw from the coherence or incoherence of body and words?  
 What did your body do as you heard the portion aloud?  
 What did that tell you of your own story; of your history with this portion; of your questions and insights of this portion today?

How might the reader hold their posture differently, and what might that say with or against the words?

What different movements or gestures, what different facial expressions or use of voice?

If your reader is game, you could try some of the possibilities.

*Emotion*

What impact does this portion have on your felt emotions? Can you name what you feel?

What do your emotions / feelings lead you to understand about this portion; yourself; God/Holy One?

Explore the range of emotions of the group – without judging right or wrong, be curious about the differences in your feelings.

Consider which emotions reflect our own stories; our past encounters with this portion; our shared community stories and experiences.

Consider which emotions for the characters seem to fit within an authentic range of possibilities

If your reader is comfortable having a play, perhaps try some of the different emotions in repeated readings, the ones that fit and the ones that don't, and see what that shows you about the portion, and its meaning for you today.

*Audience*

How did the portion speak to you personally; to your community; to our world, today?

How has that remained the same from past encounters with this portion?

In what ways does it seem to speak differently today? Problematically, helpfully, neutrally?

With the help of commentaries or other scholarship, what similarities and differences can you see between how this portion speaks today and how it may have been received by its earliest / original audiences?

How does the language work for you as receivers of this portion? What words or phrases would you change so that your audience / you have a chance to hear nuance, allusions, and wordplays from the original language, that convey and enhance meaning in the portion?

*Critical Reflection*

Collate your thoughts on the range of possibilities for how a reader (aloud) might communicate this portion with meaning for an audience today.

From the possibilities, what choices would you make for

- posture, movement, gesture, voice
- emotional expression, tone, and range
- intonation, translation, comment

when mediating this portion by reading it aloud for listeners today?

**Close with prayer:** *silent, still, body, breath, spoken, as is appropriate*

## Engaging the Bible with our Whole Selves

### Session outlines – Long play

#### Session one : body

##### Opening meditation

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here with our whole bodies  
bones, muscles, sinews, organs,  
breath, blood, water  
We can feel what clothes us,  
what holds us  
We notice what we may see,  
we notice what we may hear,  
we breathe deep and notice the breath  
in our lungs, and what scents  
we take in, we lick our lips,  
we swallow, we taste life;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here, feeling the light,  
the weight, the shadow  
of stories we encountered in recent  
days, are living, are living,  
we breathe deep and notice  
how we feel today, how we are  
today;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here together, we feel  
the bodies beside us, notice  
the breathing of those with us,  
consider what we know of the stories  
we are each living, side by side.

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
welcomed by Holy One, healed  
by Holy One, whole in Holy One's  
love and life and story.  
We are here for the story,  
as we are, bodies, feelings,  
community.

**Hear the portion aloud**

One person reads the selected portion aloud. It would be helpful for the reader to have read through the portion several times beforehand, and several days in advance. If your practice is to learn and tell biblical stories by heart, that is also a good way to hear it for this study method.

*Listeners* as you hear the portion spoken aloud, note

*what you saw in the reader*

what you felt from the reader

what you felt yourself

what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you listened

*Readers* as you prepare and speak aloud, note

*where and how your body moved*

what emotion you felt and / or expressed

any connection for your audience as you read – what you saw, heard, from them

what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you spoke

**Discussion prompts**

*Body*

What did the body of the reader seem to say?

Did it support or contradict the words?

What meaning do you draw from the coherence or incoherence of body and words?

What did your body do as you heard the portion aloud?

What did that tell you of your own story; of your history with this portion; of your questions and insights of this portion today?

How might the reader hold their posture differently, and what might that say with or against the words?

What different movements or gestures, what different facial expressions or use of voice?

If your reader is game, you could try some of the possibilities.

*Critical Reflection*

Collate your thoughts on the range of possibilities for how a reader (aloud) might communicate this portion through their body with meaning for an audience today.

From the possibilities, what choices would you make for *posture, movement, gesture, voice*, when mediating this portion by reading it aloud for listeners today?

**Close with prayer:** *silent, still, body, breath, spoken, as is appropriate*

## **Session two : emotion**

### **Opening meditation**

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here with our whole bodies  
bones, muscles, sinews, organs,  
breath, blood, water  
We can feel what clothes us,  
what holds us  
We notice what we may see,  
we notice what we may hear,  
we breathe deep and notice the breath  
in our lungs, and what scents  
we take in, we lick our lips,  
we swallow, we taste life;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here, feeling the light,  
the weight, the shadow  
of stories we encountered in recent  
days, are living, are living,  
we breathe deep and notice  
how we feel today, how we are  
today;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here together, we feel  
the bodies beside us, notice  
the breathing of those with us,  
consider what we know of the stories  
we are each living, side by side.

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
welcomed by Holy One, healed  
by Holy One, whole in Holy One's  
love and life and story.  
We are here for the story,  
as we are, bodies, feelings,  
community.

### **Hear the portion aloud**

One person reads the selected portion aloud. It would be helpful for the reader to have read through the portion several times beforehand, and several days in advance. If your practice is to learn and tell biblical stories by heart, that is also a good way to hear it for this study method.

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what you saw in the reader  
*what you felt from the reader*  
*what you felt yourself*  
what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you listened

*Readers* as you prepare and speak aloud, note  
where and how your body moved  
*what emotion you felt and / or expressed*  
any connection for your audience as you read – what you saw, heard, from them  
what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you spoke

### **Discussion prompts**

#### *Emotion*

What impact does this portion have on your felt emotions? Can you name what you feel?  
What do your emotions / feelings lead you to understand about this portion; yourself;  
God/Holy One?

Explore the range of emotions of the group – without judging right or wrong, be curious  
about the differences in your feelings.

Consider which emotions reflect our own stories; our past encounters with this portion;  
our shared community stories and experiences.

Consider which emotions for the characters seem to fit within an authentic range of  
possibilities

If your reader is comfortable having a play, perhaps try some of the different emotions  
in repeated readings, the ones that fit and the ones that don't, and see what that shows  
you about the portion, and its meaning for you today.

#### *Critical Reflection*

Collate your thoughts on the range of possibilities for how a reader (aloud) might  
communicate this portion through their emotions with meaning for an audience today.  
From the possibilities, what choices would you make for *emotional expression, tone, and  
range*, when mediating this portion by reading it aloud for listeners today?

**Close with prayer:** *silent, still, body, breath, spoken, as is appropriate*

### **Session three : audience**

#### **Opening meditation**

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here with our whole bodies  
bones, muscles, sinews, organs,  
breath, blood, water  
We can feel what clothes us,  
what holds us  
We notice what we may see,  
we notice what we may hear,  
we breathe deep and notice the breath  
in our lungs, and what scents  
we take in, we lick our lips,  
we swallow, we taste life;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here, feeling the light,  
the weight, the shadow  
of stories we encountered in recent  
days, are living, are living,  
we breathe deep and notice  
how we feel today, how we are  
today;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
We are here together, we feel  
the bodies beside us, notice  
the breathing of those with us,  
consider what we know of the stories  
we are each living, side by side.

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves  
welcomed by Holy One, healed  
by Holy One, whole in Holy One's  
love and life and story.  
We are here for the story,  
as we are, bodies, feelings,  
community.

#### **Hear the portion aloud**

One person reads the selected portion aloud. It would be helpful for the reader to have read through the portion several times beforehand, and several days in advance. If your practice is to learn and tell biblical stories by heart, that is also a good way to hear it for this study method.

*Listeners* as you hear the portion spoken aloud, note  
 what you saw in the reader  
 what you felt from the reader  
 what you felt yourself  
*what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you listened*

*Readers* as you prepare and speak aloud, note  
 where and how your body moved  
 what emotion you felt and / or expressed  
*any connection for your audience as you read – what you saw, heard, from them*  
*what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you spoke*

### **Discussion prompts**

#### *Audience*

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How does the language work for you as receivers of this portion? What words or phrases would you change so that your audience / you have a chance to hear nuance, allusions, and wordplays from the original language, that convey and enhance meaning in the portion?

#### *Critical Reflection*

Collate your thoughts on the range of possibilities for how a reader (aloud) might communicate this portion with meaning for their particular audience today.

From the possibilities, what choices would you make for *intonation, translation, comment*, when mediating this portion by reading it aloud for listeners today?

**Close with prayer:** *silent, still, body, breath, spoken, as is appropriate*

## Session four : reflection

Each participant prepares the portion for reading aloud, guided by the discussions of the past three sessions.

Participants should also prepare some notes on their decisions for using their body, emotions, and language, how they made them and why.

Divide the time you have agreed for you session among the number of participants, so that each will have equal time to read and have their interpretation discussed.

Be diligent in keeping to time, so as to avoid disadvantaging later readers in the session.

### Opening meditation

We are here with our whole selves

We are here with our whole bodies

bones, muscles, sinews, organs,

breath, blood, water

We can feel what clothes us,

what holds us

We notice what we may see,

we notice what we may hear,

we breathe deep and notice the breath

in our lungs, and what scents

we take in, we lick our lips,

we swallow, we taste life;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves

We are here, feeling the light,

the weight, the shadow

of stories we encountered in recent

days, are living, are living,

we breathe deep and notice

how we feel today, how we are

today;

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves

We are here together, we feel

the bodies beside us, notice

the breathing of those with us,

consider what we know of the stories

we are each living, side by side.

*pause*

We are here with our whole selves

welcomed by Holy One, healed

by Holy One, whole in Holy One's

love and life and story.

We are here for the story,

as we are, bodies, feelings,

community.

### **Hear the portion aloud**

One person reads the selected portion aloud.

*Listeners* as you hear the portion spoken aloud, note

what you saw in the reader

what you felt from the reader

what you felt yourself

*what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you listened*

*Readers* as you prepare and speak aloud, note

where and how your body moved

what emotion you felt and / or expressed

*any connection for your audience as you read – what you saw, heard, from them*

*what stories from our time, place, world, community were evoked as you spoke*

After each reading, invite each listener to note one thing from the reading, then invite the reader to comment in response to those observations, or their own notes.

### **Closing prayer:**

God of the Story,

thank you for meeting us each as we are,

in flesh and bone and sinew and breath,

in feeling and senses and mind and spirit,

in community, relationship, in time and place.

Thank you for the insights and questions of our sessions

with this portion of our Sacred Story;

thank you for our voices and our sharing,

our listening and our wondering.

Now that we have inhabited this portion,

invited it to dwell deeply within us,

may your Story shape our being, and our living,

people of the Sacred Story, and its Spirit.

Amen.