

PERFORMING EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

Scholars of early Christian literature acknowledge that oral traditions lie behind the New Testament gospels. While the concept of orality is widely accepted, it has not resulted in a corresponding effort to understand the reception of the gospels within their oral milieu. In this book, Kelly R. Iverson reconsiders the experiential context in which early Christian literature was received and interpreted. He argues that reading and performance are distinguishable media events, and, significantly, that they produce distinctive interpretive experiences for readers and audiences alike. Iverson marshals an array of methodological perspectives demonstrating how performance generates a unique experiential context that shapes and informs the interpretive process. Iverson's study explores the dynamic oral environment in which ancient audiences experienced the gospel stories. He shows why an understanding of oral performance has important implications for the study of the NT, as well as for several issues that have gone largely unquestioned by biblical scholars.

Kelly R. Iverson is Associate Professor of New Testament at Baylor University. He is the author or editor of *From Text to Performance: Narrative and Performance Criticisms in Dialogue and Debate* (2014), *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect* (2011), and *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: "Even the Dogs under the Table Eat the Children's Crumbs"* (2007).

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Audience Experience and Interpretation of the
Gospels

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To Kim
... my everything

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PREFACE

This book will never be finished. But it is time to let go. Over ten years ago, I began thinking about the framework for this project. Though I was confident about the general direction, I had no idea how far this project would stretch me nor any sense of the diverse and interesting fields that would be explored. As the years have passed and I have continued to reflect on the types of interactions that take place in an oral context, I have come to appreciate the rich and profound dynamics of performance. The variegated interactions that take place between performer and audience are intuitive and spontaneous in performance, but multifaceted, complex, and inexhaustible to describe. Because of these inherent challenges, a project like this will never be complete. This book is therefore an introductory and exploratory map, a humble attempt to chart some of the important elements that audiences experience in a performance setting. Much more could and inevitably will be said about these matters, though my hope is that the study will encourage a broader conversation about the nature of early Christian performance.

Only one name appears on the cover of this volume but a host of people have contributed to the project. To each, I owe a debt of gratitude. Without their diverse and valuable contributions this project would not have been brought to completion. I am grateful to the administration at Baylor University for granting a timely research leave, providing much needed space for the development of my thoughts and ideas. I am thankful as well for Josiah Hall, Daniel Glover, and Jeff Dale, graduate students in the Department of Religion at Baylor University, each of whom read through portions of the book and provided helpful comments and a keen

Preface

editorial eye. Last and most importantly, I am grateful for my family – Kim, Caleb, Peyton, and Jada. Their unfailing love and support is a gift from God and a constant source of encouragement. To participate in their performances – varied though they are – is truly the joy of my life.