PhD thesis

Faith living understanding: towards a theatrical model for oral theologizing

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'Faith Living Understanding:

Towards a Theatrical Model for Oral Theologizing'

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OCMS, Ph.D

March 2024

ABSTRACT

Vanhoozer's theatrical model provides a framework for theology that moves beyond intellectual abstraction to embodied performance in community informed by church tradition and bound by the canon of Scripture. The question I raise is to what extent Vanhoozer's model might provide a framework for oral theologizing. In order to answer this question, I explore Vanhoozer's model through the lens of orality studies. Using a tripartite structure of orality - dramatic epistemology, embodied rationality, and communal hermeneutics - I explore a framework for an oral theology by building upon Vanhoozer's model. I also explore real-life implications for the model using vignettes from my own work. In doing so I show how the communal nature of oral theology might enrich Vanhoozer's model. Furthermore, oral theology moves beyond Vanhoozer's understanding of doctrine to suggest that oral theology operates as canonical habitus. Proverbs, songs, story, drama, and dance become expressions of the canonical habitus, or oral doctrine. Beyond illustrating that Vanhoozer's model is an adequate framework for oral theology, I suggest that oral theology might be considered the proper domain for Vanhoozer's theodramatic theology in that it moves beyond the written word and the stage to embodied action in the real world. Oral theology is theodramatic in that it is embodied theology in community, and oral theodramatic theology provides a middle way between the fixedness of the biblical text and the perceived ephemerality of orality. Thus, oral theology is faith *living* understanding – faithfully, contextually, creatively, and communally.

'Faith Living Understanding: Towards a Theatrical Model for Oral Theologizing'

by

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BA (University of Mary Hardin-Baylor)

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Doctor of Philosophy

in Middlesex University

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March 2024

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

<div align="center">**DECLARATIONS**</div>

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed .... (Candidate)

Date .... 7 March 2024

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote.

Other sources are acknowledged by midnotes or footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed .... (Candidate)

Date .... 7 March 2024

STATEMENT 2

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my wife Tricia. Her perseverance and sacrifice over the course of this journey eclipses my own.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1   Locating Myself in the Research

In the Spring of 2000, my wife, two children, and I moved to Benin, West Africa. We were assigned as Bible translators to the Anii, a people group who had no Christian believers at the time. In the past, the Anii had quickly sent away anyone who came to share the gospel with them. In fact, the year before our arrival, the Anii stoned a mission group as they fled the area. We entered the community as linguists helping with local literacy initiatives. As linguists, we set about developing the language so that the Anii could eventually read and write in their own language. Our ultimate goal was for the Anii to quickly learn to be able to read the Bible in their heart language.

My wife and I learned the language, describing the grammar and phonology of the language while developing an orthography. As we became increasingly embedded in the people group, we learned that the Anii had little to no motivation to learn to read or write in their language. Many Anii saw literacy, or more specifically, Western education, as a tool used by their oppressors, both European colonialists and the majority peoples of their own country. Economic advance and political power were granted to those who had access to education. Historically, the Anii were deprived access to such education.

The Anii did not trust text. We heard the following phrase from many Anii people: 'We trust our traditions. We trust people. You [Westerners], you trust books.' Our (Western) approach to learning had been to research knowledge, and trustworthy knowledge was found in books. For the Anii, trustworthy knowledge was found in the wisdom of the community, particularly the elders of the community. We had moved our family to West Africa to share the truth of God's Word to people who had never heard it. We certainly hoped that the Anii would trust God's Word, but up to that point, our focus of trusting in God's Word meant trusting in the message contained within the book we

intended to translate into the Anii language. We would learn that Word that became flesh, a person, was much more trustworthy for the Anii people.

As we set upon our journey of discovering what trustworthy communication among the Anii people might look like, we realised that our vision was that people might hear and believe the Word of God so that their lives might be transformed — our vision was not that the Anii people might read and intellectually assent to the propositional truths presented in Scripture. The Anii shared truth — the kind of wisdom that impacted everyday life and decision-making — through stories, songs, and especially proverbs. Learning happens through apprenticeship and experience. Through our years of living among the Anii people and learning from them, we learned that the Anii communicated differently than we did, and their modes of thought and mental categorisations were different than ours. Their cognitive schema and processes tended to be communal and highly situated in real-life contexts.

Over the years, I have come to recognize the oral nature of my own upbringing. I grew up in rural Texas. While I learned to read and write in public school, I grew up in a community with the hallmarks of oral cognitive schemas and processes. My community made decisions as a community, passed on wisdom through narratives and sayings, and thought in concrete, embodied terms. However, it is important to note that, as a college-educated man from the United States, I had access to the education and cultural knowledge that allowed me to access, understand, and participate in the highly literate world of theological theory and exegetical resource much more easily than my oral brothers and sisters in the global south. After all, ironically few of the sources I cite in this dissertation are from *oral* theologians, and the vast majority of sources I cite are from westerners. Throughout my 26 years on the mission field, I have always had more access to exegetical and material resources than the oral communities I worked in, and that influenced my interactions with those communities.

Since our time among the Anii, we have lived among oral learners in India and the United Kingdom. We have worked in over 30 countries in over 200 languages where the people were predominantly oral learners. I have trained pastors who cannot read or write, yet they lead and teach thousands of congregants and even train other pastors in theology and ministry. These men and women are some of the most gifted theologians I have ever known. Yet, I consistently hear from both Western and non-Western pastors and theologians that these oral theologians are not qualified to shepherd the theology of their own people. I have embarked on this research journey to honour oral theologians and argue that oral theology is valid and appropriate. Furthermore, the global church has much to learn from such an approach to theology and theologizing.

1.2   Theologizing

'Sure, it is good to teach oral people to tell stories, but when you get to the point of doing theology, they have to write it down.' An intelligent and well-meaning missionary theologian told me this. He was trying to help me understand what theology is and what theology is not. In his mind, doing theology means abstracting propositional truth from Scripture and recording those truths in well-structured, rational arguments. This approach to theology, however, is a far stretch from Anselm's famous definition of theology as 'faith seeking understanding'. The word 'theology' comes from two Greek terms: theos, 'God', and logos, 'word/speech'. Therefore, the most basic definition of theology and theologizing is 'speaking about God'.

The majority of believers today and throughout history have been oral-preference learners (Lovejoy 2012). Given this oral majority, theology might more appropriately be described in terms of speaking, rather than writing, about God. Theologizing then becomes faith speaking understanding (Vanhoozer 2014). Of course, it is important to remember that theologizing is more nuanced than simply saying whatever one's opinions

may be about God. Thus, this research project will explore oral theology as speaking about God and understanding that leads to right decisions within community. Therefore, oral theology becomes faith living understanding.

Theology comes in many shapes and sizes. In an attempt to find a normative definition of theology, I have discovered that every theologian has a definition of theology that fits their own presuppositions and preferred style. I have seen this in myself; I started this research project with a bias against systematic theology. I considered systematics a barrier to oral theologians engaging in the practice of theology. My original intent was to map a more excellent way for theology and theologizing. But as I have read different theologians, I have come to appreciate that they all have a great desire to equip those in the body of Christ to conform their minds to the likeness of Christ in such a way that they might live worthy lives in the light of the gospel. At the same time, the philosophical categories of traditional systematic theology do not prove helpful for the oral theologian, not simply because they do not lead to understanding, but because they do not lead the oral theologian into Christlikeness in word and deed. Therefore, the intent of theology and theologizing, as defined by this project, is to experience God's Word in a way that leads God's people, empowered by God's Spirit, to be transformed into Christlikeness in their minds, their affections, their relationships, and their actions in community.

As Hauerwas states, 'There is no method that can free theology of the necessity to respond to the challenges of trying to discern what being a Christian entails in this place and at this time' (Hauerwas 2015:24). Theology, then, is theologizing, i.e. thinking rightly about God in a way that transforms thought and intentions, which leads to right speaking and right living. This project will explore a framework for theologizing which might, in turn, provide a framework for right-living 'towards God' (Ames and Eusden 1968).

1.3   Orality

At its most basic, orality is the reliance on the spoken rather than the written word. However, the term 'orality' has evolved along with the maturation of orality studies. The term now encompasses a constellation of characteristics and attributes that comprise the meaning of the term (Madinger 2010a). In the following sections, I will describe different approaches to orality within the evolution of orality studies, which highlight this constellation of characteristics and attributes. In doing so, I will show that orality studies is a multidisciplinary field that cannot be distilled into one short definition nor defined by what it is not (i.e. not literacy).

1.3.1   Orality as Living Discourse

We can trace orality studies back to the teachings of Socrates as described in Plato's *The Republic* and *Phaedrus*. Scholars believe Plato wrote *Phaedrus* and *The Republic* around the same time, and both show some of the tension between the oral and textual worlds as the technology of writing was coming onto the scene. Through the character of Socrates, Plato contends for his own dialectical approach to teaching, which retains a strong oral preference. He goes so far as to exclude all poets from his republic because they do not participate in dialectical narratives. Socrates warns against teaching through the written word. He describes such teaching as 'a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance' (Plato 2022: 274-5). Here, Socrates shows a strong distrust of text. From his point of view, text cannot adequately represent the inner thoughts of men. Text cannot enter into dialogue; therefore, it cannot explain nor defend itself. Socrates views textuality as inherently inhuman. According to Socrates, and presumably, Plato, who gave Socrates voice, text weakens human mental capacity in that it no longer requires the exercise of memory.

Thus, Socrates sees the technology of writing as a threat to both education and human cognition.

This orality-textuality tension persisted throughout antiquity and into the Middle Ages. In his Confessions, Augustine describes an event where he visited Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. Ambrose was reading silently to himself. Augustine's incredulity that Ambrose was reading even though Augustine could not hear Ambrose's voice reflects how Augustine lived and ministered in a milieu dominated by orality (Schaeffer 1996). For the predominantly oral audience of Augustine's milieu, understanding Scripture depended upon a discourse between text and hearer mediated through an orator. Augustine himself championed the power of oral rhetoric while simultaneously advocating for the textual authority of Scripture. At the same time, Augustine still believed Scripture was imbued with life when it was properly voiced; he argued that ultimate Scriptural authority located itself in the actual text of Scripture (Schaefer 1996:1139). Therefore, he presided over a period in which the dominant performance of preaching and learning continued to be highly oral while moving towards a textual base of authority. In this period, orality was considered a living discourse that presided over text.

1.3.2   Orality as Memory and Performance

Centuries after Plato banned poets from his republic and Augustine intertwined oral rhetoric and Scriptural authority, a literary critic in the 1930s, Milman Parry, and his pupil, Albert Lord, attempted to develop a critical method for studying Homeric poetry such as the Odyssey and the Iliad. Homer, himself illiterate, composed his poems orally for oral performance. The oral nature of ancient texts that were only written down long after they were composed posed a particular problem for literary analysis. Therefore, in order to develop a method for analysing the oral poetics of Homer, Lord and Parry researched Yugoslavian epic poetry to analyse how illiterate poets might be able to

compose, memorise, and deliver epic poetry — which often took days to recount — with a high degree of fidelity and precision (Parry and Lord 1954). They found that these oral epics employed oral rhetorical devices, which aided in memory and performance. In doing so, the duo of literary critics unveiled the oral rhetorical style indicative of epic poetry and oral performance (Lord 2018). These studies of oral performance moved predominant approaches to orality from a focus on orality as modes of discourse (as understood by Socrates and Augustine) towards a focus on how oral content could be immortalised through rhetoric and memory so it could continue to be performed for future audiences.

1.3.3 Orality as a Form of Cognition

Twenty years after Lord and Parry completed their research, a group of scholars explored the effects of the technology of writing upon human cognition and communication. The primary voices in this research belonged to a group of scholars who formed the so-called Toronto School of Communication.[1] These scholars, all from different academic disciplines, were primarily concerned with the effects of writing on communication.

Any serious discussion about orality must include the Toronto School's Walter Ong. He is a key voice in orality studies, though his findings have been criticised as being overly binary, thus creating a 'Great Divide' between oral and literate people. Ong was not as clearly bifurcated in his views as his critics accuse, but his arguments are so salient and convincing that readers of Ong tend to read his conclusions as black and white. In any case, Ong insisted that literacy is a technology that has remapped the cognitive

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[1] The Toronto School's primary voices were: economist Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951); literary critic Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism; Four Essays* (Princeton,: Princeton University Press, 1957); philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy; the Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); and Jesuit priest and English literature professor Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*. Although historical literacy specialist Eric Havelock at times denied being a member of the Toronto School, he is often associated with the group: Eric Alfred Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write : Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 1986).

processes of people, who are born oral. He described some of these resulting shifts in cognition, labelling them 'the psychodynamics' of orality (Ong 2012:31–9) which will be explored more fully in other portions of the thesis. For Ong, orality is a complex mixture of qualities focused on the communication and cognition of a person or a group of people. These qualities are characterized by presence, concrete reality, and relational dynamics.

1.3.4 Orality and Rationalities

Ong drew extensively upon the research of anthropologists in the first part of the 20th century who attempted to describe the cognition of non-Western people groups. Lévy-Bruhl was one of the first anthropologists to posit that there were two different forms of rationality (Lévy-Bruhl 1985a). Unfortunately, he mirrored the common perceptions of his field during his period. He labelled non-western societies as 'primitive', as opposed to the 'modern' society of the West. Lévy-Bruhl posited that 'primitives' had 'pre-logical' or 'magical' thought processes.

Fellow anthropologist Franz Boas produced an equally unfortunate title, *The Mind of Primitive Man*. However, he contested the proposition that these 'primitives' were 'pre-logical'. Instead, he theorized that the people he studied had different cognitive categories which accounted for the differences in cognition (Boas 1965). This debate over 'prelogical' cognition continued as anthropologists recognized and made initial attempts in analysing the differences between oral and literate cultures.

Jack Goody is the seminal voice in orality among anthropologists. He wrote from his fieldwork in West Africa and agreed with Ong that writing reshapes the brain (Goody 1987a; Goody 1972):

> …when an individual comes to master writing, the basic system underlying the nature of his mental processes is changed fundamentally as the external symbol system comes to mediate the organization of all his basic intellectual operations… knowledge of a writing system would alter the very structure of memory, classification, and problem-solving… (Goody 1987a:205)

Though both Goody and Ong would later change their viewpoints to a more nuanced understanding of how textuality affects cognition, many consider the two responsible for the development of the so-called 'Great Divide' theory between oral and literate culture. As the name suggests, the 'Great Divide' theory understands oral and literate cultures as incommensurate with one another.

Ruth Finnegan, another anthropologist working in West Africa, challenged assumptions of the 'Great Divide' theory and showed that oral cultures can and do engage in abstract thought processes. According to Finnegan, situated rationality and embodied epistemology do not necessarily result in an absence of abstraction. She proposed a category of 'Oral Literature' that focuses on oral performances but shows an elasticity and creativity which had before been assumed to be impossible among oral cultures (Finnegan 1988).

Though there remains a general, and genuine, difference in cognitive schema between highly textual and highly oral people, orality studies have moved beyond such a harsh binary. I will explore this further in the section below, which describes how contemporary sciences have researched the impact of textuality on cognition.

The enduring effect of these pioneering anthropologists was to highlight that a plurality of rationalities and means of cognition exist. Orality is not simply a case of ignorance (i.e. being illiterate) nor is it a matter of 'primitivism'. Each culture has a rationality interior to itself based upon differing degrees of reliance upon orality or textuality as well as based upon the physical, social, and historical context of the people.

1.3.5   Contemporary Scientific Engagement with Orality

Approximately the same time anthropologists were beginning to research orality and oral rationality, other fields of science also began such research. This often took the form of exploring the impact of writing upon oral cultures and cognition. Psychologists researched the impact of writing on cognition while other social scientists became

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interested in the cultural impact of highly textual forms of education on highly oral communities. More recently, neuroscientists have explored the differences in oral and textual brain structures, particularly as it pertains to secondary orality and the increasing prevalence of digital orality.

1.3.5.1 Cognitive Implications of Orality

Ong referenced the work of psychologists Lev Vygotsky and his student Aleksandr Luria in his description of oral epistemology and rationality (Luria 1976a; Vygotskiĭ 1994). Vygotsky and Luria were some of the first psychologists to explore the cognitive dimensions of oral cultures. Although they have been criticized for designing their experiments to advance the Marxist philosophy of the Soviet Union, their experiments are still cited by many orality scholars (Kotik-Friedgut et al. 2014).

Vygotsky described how children learn through dialog with others. He posited a theory called the 'Zone of Proximal Development' which supports the need for learning in community. The more oral people are, the more critical this communal learning. Again, critics argue that Vygotsky was pushing a communal communist agenda through his research, but orality scholars resonated with the findings that highly oral children engage in meaning-making and learning through relationship and community (Derry 2013). Ong would explain this zone of proximal development in children through the concept of *presence* with others (Ong 1967).

Aleksandr Luria's experiments have had a much greater impact on orality studies than those of Vygotsky. Luria's findings were used extensively by Ong. Luria tested non-literate people in Uzbekistan between 1931 and 1932. One of his more famous questions in the experiment centred around syllogisms. Luria gave illiterate peasants a syllogism and asked them to respond. One syllogism was: 'In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zembla is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What colour are the bears there?' Luria categorized three different responses, one by

someone non-literate, and two by people Luria described as barely literate. The non-illiterate respondent said, 'I don't know. I've seen a black bear. I've never seen any others.' The two 'barely literate' respondents answered: 'You say that it's cold there [in Novaya Zembla] and there's snow, so the bears there are white,' so 'To go by your words, they should all be white.' Luria extrapolated from these, and other similar responses, that even a slight amount of literacy appears to have a significant effect on thinking and reasoning (Luria 1976a).

Like Vygotsky, Luria's experiments have been called into question, but the impact of his studies continue to ring true among orality scholars: highly oral people tend toward an epistemology which is embodied and a rationality which is highly situated and context dependent. I explore this in further detail Chapter 5, but the next section will show that even Westernized, literate people may exhibit varying levels of orality based on situation, personality, and sub-culture.

1.3.5.2   Social Implications of Orality

Despite Luria's assertion that literacy has a significant effect on thinking and reasoning, social scientist Brian Street rejected both Ong and Goody's postulation that literacy was the cause of cognitive shifting and the corresponding 'Great Divide' between oral and literate people. Instead, Street suggests that the cognitive shift from concrete forms of cognition to abstraction is more likely a combination of factors which include literacy but also the very educational systems that come with the acquisition of literacy (such as sitting in classrooms and moving towards lecture and examination rather than apprenticeship and consensus building). Other social scientists, such as David Olson and Deborah Tannen, joined Street in denying the existence of an oral-literate divide (Olson 1986; Tannen 1982). Scribner and Cole best describe the debate between Street and orality scholars of his day:

At the same time, perhaps Street's greatest influence on orality came through his defence of literacy. Street proposed that any given person may experience multiple 'literacies' which may be language-specific, register-specific, or domain-specific (Street 1995a). In so doing, he opened orality studies to the idea of multiple "oralities". The theory of multiple oralities suggests, similarly to multiple literacies, that any given person may exhibit high-oral preference in particular languages, registers, or domains. A person may be highly textual in their national language of education while still having a high oral preference in their mother-tongue. Likewise, a person may have a particular preference for textuality when communicating with work colleagues in their own language but a high oral preference in the register they use with friends and family. A person may also be highly capable and comfortable working among texts in the domain of work or education while maintaining a high preference for orality at home or in non-work-related activities.

Knowledge and understanding are multivalent concepts. Paulo Freire believed non-literate people have many skills, a lot of knowledge, and significant experience (Freire 1970). For Freire, oral epistemology is embedded in the natural, cultural, and historical realities in which people are immersed. Therefore, abstract concepts must be brought into concrete situations — i.e. oral cognition must be embodied physically, culturally, and situationally. Freire advocated a world-mediated approach to education which, much like Plato's approach, is dialogical in nature. He abandoned the student-teacher power divide in favour of a mutual approach to co-creation of knowledge. This is in direct opposition to what Freire terms the 'banking' approach to education which has dominated modernity. The 'banking' approach to education, as Freire describes, sees students as empty bank accounts which the teacher fills with deposits of knowledge. Freire suggests that the persistence of this educational model has dehumanized both student and teacher, and this

model stimulates the oppression of the poor. Freire called for an 'authentic' approach to education, by which he meant a real-world approach to teaching oral learners through embodied epistemology and dialectical learning.

1.3.5.3 Physical Implications of Orality

As today's scholars debate how the internet has changed our memories, they echo the arguments Socrates made in antiquity. We no longer expect to recall historical facts or ideas — we simply do a quick search of the mass of data on the internet. Our conversations seem to require the aid of technology to make our points or provide support for our arguments. In fact, we could argue that digital communication seems to be rewiring brains into a type of secondary orality.

At the risk of resurrecting the 'Great Divide', it is important to point out that neuroscientists have discovered that there are physical differences in the brains of people who have high levels of literacy and those with significantly lower levels of literacy. Neuroscientists such as Michael Gazzaniga described the plasticity of the human brain (Gazzaniga and Reuter-Lorenz 2010). He and other neuroscientists concluded that literacy does indeed physically reshape the human brain by reforming synaptic pathways.[2]

Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* explores the impact of technology on the brain, beginning with literacy and moving into digital communications. In doing so, he claims that his ability to read (or more specifically, to focus, analyse, and re-read) has been drastically altered. Carr describes this move away from reading as a move back to orality, albeit a digital orality. In this move back to orality, his cognitive functioning is being

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[2] See also Maryanne Wolf and Catherine J. Stoodley, *Proust and the Squid : The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (Thriplow: Icon Books, 2008).

brought back to its primordial state. To support this theory, Carr uses the research of psychologist Ostrosky-Solis which states that reading reshapes the brain

> Evidence of this shaping process can be seen in many neurological studies. Experiments have revealed that the brains of the literate differ from the brains of the illiterate in many ways — not only in how they understand language but in how they process visual signals, how they reason, and how they form memories. "Learning how to read," reports the Mexican psychologist Feggy Ostrosky-Solís, has been shown to "powerfully shape adult neuropsychological systems." (Carr 2010:33–4)

Carr's description of this rewiring of his brain may relate to the concept of secondary orality. Secondary orality describes the state of being in which someone who was born oral, passes into textuality, then chooses to return to orality — in Carr's case, a digitally-based orality.

Not only have anthropologists and literacy specialists seen a shift in cognition as a result of textuality,[3] neuroscientists have also seen a correlation between textuality and shift in brain function. Furthermore, as neuroscience moves from studying the cognitive effects of text technology towards studying the effects of social media and hypertextuality (Riffaterre 1994), we begin to see the emergence of the secondary orality described decades ago by Ong moving towards a digital form of orality.

An astute reader may observe that I have often referred to the effects of *textuality* on cognition rather than the effects of *orality* upon cognition. This is because orality is a primordial state of being that has been impacted by textuality. I use the term primordial as opposed to primitive — I use primordial to mean 'at birth' or 'inherent'. Primary oral learners are born oral and remain so. Secondary oral learners are born oral, pass through textuality, and return to a state of orality by choice. The majority of oral people, however, weave in and out of textuality while retaining a high degree of oral preference in epistemology, cognition, and rationality. Therefore, oral people can have a multitude of oralities depending on the situation, the domain they operate in, or even their own

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[3] I prefer the term *textuality* here in that I wish to refer not only to the learned skill of reading but also the inhabitation of a world dominated by text and textual rationality.

personalities. Instead of conceptualising orality as inferior to or at the opposite end of a spectrum from textuality, orality should be conceptualised as a constellation of various characteristics with cognitive, social, and even neurological implications. For help in further understanding these characteristics of orality, I turn now to unlikely bedfellows: the highly abstract, highly textual, discipline of hermeneutic philosophy.

1.3.6 Impact of Philosophy on Orality Studies

The anthropologists, psychologists, and neuroscientists discussed in the previous sections sought to describe 'other' forms of rationality that seemed to contradict the Enlightenment ideals of universal rationality and objective truth. Postmodern philosophy reacted against this Enlightenment agenda. Postmodern philosophers explored a rationality that was culturally mediated and an epistemology that was experientially embodied. Although much of the hermeneutics of postmodern philosophy is textual in nature, many themes of postmodern philosophical hermeneutics and epistemology parallel those of modern orality studies.

As the sciences conceptualised orality, German philosopher Martin Heidegger brought philosophy to its ontological foundations. Though not speaking specifically about orality, Heidegger argued that every being is thrown into the world (Heidegger 1962a). In other words, humans are not thinking subjects that stand above the world making sense of it. Meaning and understanding are necessarily situated in the world. The reader, for Heidegger, is a key figure in meaning making and the reader comes with presuppositions that come from his being in the world.

1.3.6.1 Ontological Turn

Heidegger reimagined the concept of the hermeneutical circle by asserting that it is an ontological circle rather than an epistemological one. Thus, humans are beings integrated into a system of relationships with the world, and interpretation comes as an expression

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of these interrelations. We classify our understanding along the lines of a taxonomy of relationships that are determined by our place in the world. As we understand our relationship to the world around us, we gain greater insight into ourselves, which in turn allows us to explore more of our relationship to the world arounds us, and so on. Thus, we always come to a text as culturally situated beings-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962a).

This ontological turn towards situated, embodied hermeneutics parallels the highly situated nature of orality in which cognition is dependent on connections to real life. Heidegger brought the world into our conceptualisation of understanding. For Heidegger, his existence is not dependent upon an inner Cartesian *cogito:* 'I think; therefore, I am'. Beings are because they are in the world. Humans are beings in the world. As beings in the world, we define ourselves by what we are in the world, and in our very existence we understand ourselves. Interpretation happens as we articulate different aspects of our understanding — an understanding rooted in our everyday lives.

Heidegger describes an *everydayness* in our being in the world which he says is privileged in 'primitive', i.e. oral, societies — although he does not equate everydayness itself with being 'primitive'. On the contrary, he states that even in Western, highly analytical societies, *everydayness* is a mode of being in the world. However, he believes that 'primitive' societies are characterized by a primordial absorption of 'phenomena' (Heidegger 1969a:36-7). Therefore, the concrete world is the domain of oral societies rather than propositional analysis. In other words, the everydayness of meaning making in oral societies centres around the things themselves and the relationships those things have with other beings.

If Heidegger brought ontology to epistemology and hermeneutics, Heidegger's student, Gadamer, moved this philosophy forward by bringing history and tradition into interpretation. Heidegger insisted that beings are inextricably thrown into the world and so understanding is contingent upon a being's physical existence in time. Gadamer states

that beings are also thrown into a history or tradition that also forms their cognitive environment, thus impacting their understanding and cognition (Gadamer 1975a).

1.3.6.2 Hermeneutical Turn

Gadamer rejects the idea of objective, universally valid rationality in favour of a hermeneutical method which takes into account the cognitive environment of the reader. He states that everyone comes to understanding with certain presuppositions or preunderstandings. These preunderstandings are caused by our own past as well as the traditions from which we come. For example, if we try to understand history, we come to it having been influenced by our own history and its ideologies, including the potential prejudices those bring. For Gadamer, the primary goal of hermeneutics is not to uncover the meaning of the original sense-event of a text. Rather, the primary result of hermeneutics should be *phronesis*, or the discernment of right living in the present. Correct interpretation, for Gadamer, should result in correct practical judgment of how to live. As interpreters make these right decisions, the interpreters themselves are transformed in and by the act of interpretation. In this way, a reader not only reads a text, but a text reads the reader.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur moves the concept of text beyond that of symbol on a page. He sees actions as texts that can be understood and interpreted. In fact, one might say that a text is *anything* that might be interpreted. Ricoeur distinguishes between speech and writing, often by referring to Saussure's differentiation between *parole* (speech) and *langue* (language). For Ricoeur, *parole* means the utterances of speech and *langue* is the system of language that makes sense of those utterances. Ricoeur advocates a move towards a theory of discourse which places speech (discourse) as an event and language as the signs and coding used to make the event happen. Ricoeur prefers to treat text as discourse events (Ricoeur 2008a). In the same way, orality also operates on the level of speech and event rather than systems and codes.

For Ricoeur, a text represents a discourse. Discourse always involves a speaker (or writer) and a hearer (or reader) as well as something said in some situation about some reality — ultimately a world that we might inhabit (or the world of the text). In Ricoeur's 'hermeneutic of suspicion', one must always keep in mind the double eclipse that exists in writing. The reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading. The text thus produces a double eclipse of the reader and writer. Text thereby replaces the relationality of dialogue, which directly connects the voice of one to the hearing of the other. Because of this, there is always more meaning in text than what can be discernible, i.e. a surplus of meaning. Ricoeur privileges narrative as a mode of discourse that allows a reader to inhabit the world of the text. In doing so, the reader discovers not only meaning but also the possibility of new worlds of meaning created through imagination.

Ricoeur echoes the sentiments of Socrates, but he might just as well have been quoting Ong or Goody below. Ricoeur distinguishes oral and written use of language:

> Passing from speaking to writing indicates much more than a simple fixation or inscription applied to a discourse that could have been said orally…Writing announces itself as the impossibility of speaking aloud; a new instrument of thinking and of discourse is born with writing. (Ricœur 2013:12)

The world of discourse embodied by orality is first and foremost characterized by presence. Oral discourse is quite simply someone saying something to someone in the present. In the world of literature, there is a double eclipse in the acts of reading and writing; when the author writes, the audience is not present and when the reader reads, the author is not present. But in the world of orality, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is primary. Thus, *presence* is a key ingredient to communication in communities that rely heavily upon orality. Not only is this phenomenon true in face-to-face discourse, but it is becoming increasingly important through technology in the world of social media. Spatial and temporal presence are key factors in orality that have been touched upon by orality studies but have not been fully explored.

1.3.6.3 <u>Embodied Rationality</u>

Despite some of the advantages of textuality, Ricoeur recognizes 'the psychological and sociological priority of speech over writing' (Ricoeur 2008b:102). At the same time, speech is on the same side as writing in relationship to language in that both require interpretation. The interpretation of speech and writing must operate on the level of discourse. In order for interpretation to occur, a Gadamerian fusion of horizons must occur, and the reader/hearer must appropriate the meaning of the message as their own.

The relational impact of this fusion of horizons on oral cognition and communication depends upon a circumstantial milieu in which people are able to negotiate meaning and deepen mutual understanding through conversations comprised of units of story. Because of their shared environment, participants in oral discourse can question one another and point to referents of meaning through multimodal discourse features: words, sentences, gestures, body language, sounds, etc. In this way, the world of oral discourse is much like a stage on which actors are embodying a script and continuously improvising upon it. Thus, a hermeneutic of orality is one of embodiment of the message as well as the intended effects of the message.[4]

1.3.6.4 <u>Culturally Situated</u>

Like Gadamer, Ricoeur advances a traditional hermeneutic based on his understanding of text (as discourse) and narrative. According to Ricoeur, all understanding is historically effected and culturally mediated. Culture is a product of its tradition. Understanding and interpretation come through the lens of this tradition-bound cultural lens. Narrative is the vehicle of this cultural understanding:

> …the narration as the giving of the story by someone to someone, back within the movement of a transmission, a living tradition? In this, the narrative is part of a chain of speech by which a cultural community come to be constituted and through which it interprets itself narratively. This belonging to

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[4] See Austin's seminal work on uses of language. Language is not only used to convey information, but also to effect change and impact thinking. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

a tradition, in its turn, expresses something about a fundamental belonging, which is the theme of philosophy… (Ricoeur 2008b:127)

In the world of orality, humans are a cast of characters, entering and exiting the stage of the world, sometimes playing one role, other times playing another. Those roles are based on culturally mediated, historically effected scripts. Therefore, this cast forms a community that not only requires a script which has meaning but requires a company to discover that meaning. The interpretation of meaning is situated within this company or community. The cultural understanding of the community guides the interpretation and ultimately the performance of the script. The script is the message to be interpreted. The stage is the world inhabited by the characters. In the same way, a hermeneutic of orality must consider interpretation within the world of the oral person, which is inexorably grounded in concrete reality rather than abstraction.

In oral hermeneutics, the intended effect of a message is right living in the real world. Ong gives an example of this from Luria's experiments (Ong 2012:55). A man was asked what sort of a person he was. He answered simply, 'What can I say about my own heart?... As for others, they can tell you about me. I can't say anything.' Luria, and Ong, took this to mean that oral people do not engage in self-reflection. I believe it is more likely a reflection of an expectation of right living in community among others. Oral people tend to focus on the right thing they should do rather than the right thing they should think. In this way, the meaning of the message is embodied as much as the message itself.

1.4   The Need for Oral Theologizing

The previous section on orality described orality in global, multidisciplinary terms. To summarize: oral peoples tend toward an epistemology that is highly concrete and

relational as opposed to abstract and propositional. Furthermore, oral understanding and meaning is understood within community and in real-life situations.

As a result of these characteristics, missiologists within orality studies argue that oral peoples need to engage in theologizing by using highly relational and non-text dependent media (International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2005a). However, in championing a way forward for considering the needs of oral people, these oral studies missiologists tend to implicitly deny that oral people can and do engage in second-order theological discourse (Naudé 1995; Foster 2008).

Some missiologists propose storytelling, music, dance, and other ritual forms as oral versions of theologizing. To be sure, oral peoples exhibit theological understanding through such performances of Scripture. These forms of enacting Scripture play a significant role in the healthy development of theological understanding, but relying solely upon this type of performance as theologizing limits theology to liturgical performance.

This project uses the phrase 'oral theologizing' to describe the theological processes and systems used by oral people who have developed their own theological understanding. Up to this point in orality studies scholars have deemed such systematic understandings and formations of theology to be unlikely among oral peoples given the characteristics of oral learners juxtaposed with the prevailing methods of systematics within modern theology. In this project, I intend to argue that such a perception of oral theology is misguided.

Given the apparent incommensurability between orality and these prevailing methods of theological enquiry, it would seem that theologizing in oral societies must

necessarily differ from modernist methods of theology.[5] Modernist theological enquiry is based on the Enlightenment notions of universal rationality and scientific method which rely upon a positivist approach to epistemology (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:142–3). However, appealing for a recognition of theology in oral cultures is not an appeal to the radical relativism of postmodern theological methods which, when taken to the extreme, advocate an 'everything goes' approach to theologizing. Oral theology is a different means of theologizing altogether. Oral theologizing cannot be judged by a method of theology that requires the articulation of systematic propositional statements — such statements rely upon an Enlightenment epistemology that requires a God-like position on the part of the interpreter to access ahistorical, propositional statements. Nor can oral theology subscribe to a cultural relativism that rejects truth external to its own belief system. This project will explore the possibilities of an understanding of oral theology which puts the social aspects of belief and practice of oral learners into dialogue with an approach to theologizing which is committed to the embodiment of Scripture in oral contexts.

Modern theology strove to keep, and in some cases regain, a place at the academic table. In so doing, theologians have appealed to science and philosophy to justify not only their place in the academy but also to validate the concept of theology itself (Sarup and Raja 1996:94). In the battle for academic relevance in right thinking about God — the *scientia* of theology — theologians seem to have lost the practical war to engender right speaking and right living about God — the *sapientia* of theology. As stated above, there are many definitions of theology. But the *telos* of all theology should contain not only

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[5] The term "modernist" as it relates to theology has polyvalent meaning. Based upon the context in which it is used, the term might mean (a) modern; (b) particular European theological movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; or (c) a pejorative depiction of certain works/outlooks that are to be taken representative of post-Enlightenment rationalism. The author of this thesis recognizes that use of the term in the thesis inclines to (c).

right thinking, but also right speaking and right living. Theology then becomes faith *living* understanding.

The global church needs to hear from oral theologians. Orality is characterized by a high value on communal, real-life, and embodied practices (International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2005a:76). Theologians operating from such an oral paradigm have unique contributions to give to a theology that teaches people to 'live to God'. Yet, in my personal experience and in the experience of many of my colleagues who work and minister in orality studies, the vast majority of oral theologians are either ignored, dismissed, or disqualified by others (or by themselves) who assume that theology is the domain of academia and abstraction (Chiang et al. 2010; Motty 2013:161). Therefore, this project explores whether Vanhoozer's theatrical model might provide a framework for oral theology, thereby validating and elevating an oral theological method. By so doing, I seek to demonstrate how oral theology and theologians can not only contribute to but also advance theology as a whole.

1.5 The Research Question

The research question this thesis will explore is "How might Vanhoozer's theatrical model provide a framework for oral theologizing?" Vanhoozer proposes a theatrical model of theologizing. His magnum opus, *The Drama of Doctrine: a canonical-linguistic approach,* provides fertile ground for oral theologizing. Vanhoozer's model for theology is the theatre, which he describes using the modifier 'canonical-linguistic'. Vanhoozer coined the term 'canonical-linguistic' in response to George Lindbeck's 'cultural-linguistic' approach to theology. The terms served as a means of correcting the cultural relativity in Lindbeck's approach (Lindbeck 1984). Lindbeck's approach was itself meant to be a correction of the 'cognitive-propositional' and 'experiential-expressive' approaches to theologizing (1984:16–26).

Both models of theologizing Lindbeck wished to correct come from different sides of the same modernist, Enlightenment hermeneutical coin (Bernstein 1985). Lindbeck searched for a more excellent way in his cultural-linguistic model, but his model lacked clear biblical authority. For Lindbeck, the culture of the interpreting community regulates doctrine (McGrath 1997:34). Vanhoozer proposed to move that regulative authority to the canon of Scripture. In doing so, he coined the term 'canonical-linguistic theology'. Vanhoozer found a path that moves from a propositional approach to theology, which prioritises adherence to systematized universal truths, towards a model of embodied theological truth which plays itself out on the stage of the real world. He does so without jettisoning biblical authority or theological conceptuality. Instead, Vanhoozer advocates a new systematic which appreciates doctrine anchored in the authority of Scripture — which is not subject to the whims of postmodern models of theology — while moving beyond the disembodied approach of propositionalism.

This project will explore the contributions that could be made by viewing theatrical theology, particularly the Vanhoozerian model, through the lens of orality. In so doing, this research project intends to extend and enrich orality studies and the theatrical model and to demonstrate a framework for oral theologizing.

1.6   Methods/Research Approach

This project will be a textual research project in which Vanhoozer's theatrical model for theology will be explored through the lens of literature related to orality studies in order to address the main research question: to what extent can Vanhoozer's theatrical model of theology provide a framework for oral theology?

The primary source of data for this research project will come from theological and philosophical works, primarily Vanhoozer's work on theatrical theology, particularly *The Drama of Doctrine* (Vanhoozer 2005) and *Faith Speaking Understanding* (Vanhoozer

2014). Vanhoozer uses the theatre as a model for his theo-dramatic theology. This research project will place Vanhoozer's theatrical model in dialogue with orality studies in order to explore the strengths and weaknesses of using the model as a framework for an oral theology.

Theatrical theologian Wesley Vander Lugt provides an insightful description of the theatre as a model for Christian theology and practice. Vander Lugt first distinguishes between metaphors, analogies, models, and paradigms. Analogies bear a close resemblance to the reality they portray and focus on comparing relationships with relationships. Metaphors compare two fairly different things to explain one of them, therefore 'speaking of one thing as something else' (Vander Lugt 2014:20). Models, according to Vander Lugt's terms, have metaphorical relationships to the reality they model, but go beyond both metaphor and analogy by using such comparison to describe and demonstrate 'states of affairs rather than linguistic devices' (Vander Lugt 2014:22). Vander Lugt defines specifically Christian models:

> '. . . *in the context of Christian theology and practice, a model can be defined as* a state of affairs with metaphorical potential to explain reality in relation to divine revelation, expand theological knowledge, and exert practical influence' (Vander Lugt 2014:24).

In other words, models describe reality in different terms in order to allow us to understand and further explore that reality. When those models encompass many other models and carry weight as widely known and accepted models, they become paradigms.

While the theatrical model of theology has not yet reached paradigm status, Vander Lugt argues that it can serve as a strong model of Christian theology and practice. Vander Lugt clarifies that to create a theatrical model, we must consider the whole discipline of theatre, understand the limits of the model, and acknowledge that theatre is not the only model through which we can or should understand Christian theology and practice (Vander Lugt 2014:25). Despite these limits, Vander Lugt argues that theatre truly resembles theology in a way that allows us to interpret Christian experience in a new light

and use that light to expand theological understanding and horizons (Vander Lugt 2014:23). Vanhoozer's model, then, may be explored as a potential framework for an oral theology.

Orality is not a globally homogenous construct. Oral peoples exhibit different degrees of reliance upon orality in different areas of their lives. Orality studies in missiology now prefers to refer to orality in terms of *multiple* oralities since oral characteristics are particular to a given culture (Bush 2016). At the same time, general tendential characteristics of orality may be explicated. As a corollary, local oral theologies are particular, but they may operate under the umbrella of an oral theological framework. This framework becomes the pattern through which oral theologizing may occur. Missiological anthropologist Paul Hiebert describes an analogue of such an oral framework when he proposes the concept of a metatheological framework for local theologizing (Hiebert 2006:301–2).

> It is important for committed Christian theologians from around the world to develop a metatheological framework that enables them to understand, compare, and evaluate local theologies, the questions each is seeking to answer, and the sociocultural contexts in which each must define the gospel… (Hiebert 2006:302)

Hiebert describes a framework for doing global theologizing that makes sense of local theologies. He posits two criteria for evaluating the plausibility of such a framework: first, a framework must answer the question of semiotics (how meaning is communicated); second, a framework must have an appropriate epistemology (how knowledge or meaning is created).

By using the theatrical model as a framework, oral theologizing can pose appropriate methodological questions. Utilizing Vanhoozer's model as the framework allows for the exploration of a method for oral theologizing. Theological method is mediated through four sources: holy scripture, tradition, experience, and reason:

> A theologian is obliged to affirm that it is the subject matter which he or she is probing that guides the methods employed to understand that subject matter…In theology the subject matter seems easy to define—namely, God—and God is mediated to the theologian through texts, language, and

traditions…Theology historically identifies four sources of mediation between the theologian and God: holy scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. (Allen 2013:loc. 216)

Vanhoozer's *Drama of Doctrine* is roughly structured around these four mediating elements: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. The five chapters that make up the body of this thesis will reflect the four parts of Vanhoozer's Drama of Doctrine: (1) the Drama; (2) the Script (3) the Dramaturge; (4) the Performance. The flow of the argument of this thesis, however, will require a slight change of order of presentation from Vanhoozer's four parts above. Chapter two will explore the appropriateness of drama, specifically theo-drama, as a framework for oral theology by describing how theo-drama addresses gaps in orality studies and narrative theology. Chapter three will explore the place of the script, specifically Scripture, in oral theology by examining the orality within Scripture itself and how Scripture is used in oral theology.

Chapters four and five reflect Vanhoozer's performative understanding of theology in relation to oral theology. Chapter four addresses the place of community in oral theology. Chapter five proposes an embodied performative approach to oral theology. Chapter six then explores the place of the doctrine in oral theology. This chapter will explore the nature of doctrine in oral theology and propose a new perspective on doctrine in theology. Chapter seven will recapitulate the previous chapters by outlining a framework for oral theo-dramatic theology. Finally, chapter eight as a conclusion, will explore how Vanhoozer's model not only provides a framework for oral theology, but also that oral theology advances Vanhoozer's model as the most appropriate domain for the theodramatic model.

There will be two areas of primary sources for this research project. The first area consists of Vanhoozer's texts. The second area for primary sources for each chapter will be vignettes from my own experiences among oral people groups. I will examine Vanhoozer's model through the lens of orality studies literature while also exploring how

the theatrical model might be embodied, particularly in oral cultures, though the concrete examples from my observed experiences. Most chapters will follow this outline: the vignette will highlight a key theme of the chapter and ground that theological theme in real life contexts. The next section of the chapter will examine the theme from the viewpoint of orality studies. The following section will explicate Vanhoozer's model in regard to the theme. The final section will analyse the commonalities and differences to critique the suitability of Vanhoozer's theatrical model for theologizing.

1.7   Conclusion

As I have posited above, orality studies have a rich multidisciplinary history. However, theological engagement with orality has tended toward a focus on orality in relationship to the oral traditions of the biblical text rather than exploring a systematic approach to theology in oral cultures. Oral people have been disregarded and sometimes discarded as valid or effective theologians. Through engaging Vanhoozer's theatrical model with orality studies and my own experiences in oral cultures, I hope to show that oral systematic theology is not only possible, but it has extraordinary potential for bringing faith not only towards understanding but also towards transformative, living faith. This research project hopes to contribute to knowledge in the exploration and development of a framework for an oral theology based on Vanhoozer's model.

Chapter 2: From Story to Theo-drama

2.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to present theo-drama as a more appropriate category for oral theologizing. It does so by first examining the narrative turn in oral theology and then describing the gaps in narrative theology. After presenting Vanhoozer's conceptualization of theo-drama, this chapter then examines how theo-drama might address some of the gaps in narrative theology by both encompassing multiple approaches to narrative theology and adding a new dimension to such theologizing.

2.2 The King's Story: A Vignette

My wife, two children, and I lived among the Anii for five years, learning the language and culture with the intent of translating the Bible. I spent many hours sitting in mud-brick village houses trying to decipher the rapid-fire language flying through my ears — and sometimes flying well above any part of my head. Slowly but surely, I learned the language. In the process, I earned the trust of the owners of the houses and their families by becoming a familiar, non-threatening presence in the community. Perhaps I had become like a beloved family pet. In any case, my goal was to become an acceptable outsider. Over the years, I achieved that goal. Seventy-year-old King Atchiba called me his son. He would teach me as only a father can teach a son.

King Atchiba's household was my favourite household to visit in Bassila. There are approximately 80,000 Anii people and 20 Anii villages. Every village has its own dialect of Anii, and every village has its own king. Bassila is the most populous town in the area with 10,000 inhabitants. As linguists, we researched and surveyed the Anii language. Over the years we learned that the Bassila dialect of Anii is also the central and most standard dialect of the Anii language. The king of Bassila does not carry much governmental political power, but he has the most significant voice in Anii cultural

matters. He also serves as the judge in domestic disputes. Atchiba was enthroned as the king the same year we arrived in Bassila. One of the first duties of an outsider is to receive permission from the king to live in the village. My host, Mr. Gomon, the Anii literacy coordinator, brought me before Acthiba and vouched for me as someone who had come to help the Anii language community. At the first meeting Atchiba asked that I come and visit him often so that he could know what I was doing. If he knew what I was doing, he could also vouch for me. I spent many hours in Atchiba's compound, at first merely attempting to listen to the incomprehensible, rapid-fire speech of this unwritten language.[6] The king patiently spoke to me as he would a baby, then a toddler, then a child. Slowly but surely, I learned the Anii language with the help of King Atchiba.

The king bore a heavy burden. The Anii people proclaimed themselves to be Muslim, but, as the king remarked, 'They [the Anii] do their [Islamic] prayers in the front room [of their house], and they worship their fetishes and perform their traditions in the back' (Stringer and Stringer 2003:30). The king was responsible for upholding the traditional religion of the people. He performed the traditional rituals for the community, and he sought peace with the local spirits on behalf of the community. The king belonged to a family called the Tarowa, great warriors who came to Bassila after it was founded. They defended the founding families of the village, the Djeriwo and Akime, from invaders. The two founding families gave the Tarowa the right to be kings and settle disputes that arose in the village. King Atchiba had never received formal education. He could neither read nor write, but his people considered him the wisest of men, a master storyteller. People came to him for answers and wise judgements.

As my wife and I grew in our language abilities, we looked forward to translating the Bible for our Anii friends, who had become like our family. The literacy rate among

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[6] The Anii had a phonetic alphabet before we arrived, but there was no standardized orthography, so there was no material published in or about the language.

the Anii people was extremely low. We knew of only 30 people who could read or write at any level in the Anii language. As a result, we decided to develop oral Anii Bible stories before embarking on the translation of the text. I worked with two Anii men who crafted the Anii Bible stories.[7] Our team of crafters enlisted the help of King Atchiba, who was widely regarded as a master storyteller. Once we had crafted the stories in a way that was faithful to the biblical text, we would play a recorded version of the story for the king. He would then retell the story. He would bring life to each Bible story. We would then go back and revise our version of the story.

One day, about four years into our time in Bassila, there was great turmoil in the town. The Djeriwo and Akime families had a dispute over a piece of land. The dispute became violent. Several people were killed, and the local market burned to the ground. The town quickly spiralled out of control. The military was brought in to enforce a curfew and end the violence. Though the military could prevent violence, they could not bring peace. Only the judgement of the king could bring peace.

On the day of judgement, the king invited me to his compound. The king held court in a large room annexed to his house. The room was rectangular, ten metres by four metres. The only furniture in the room was the king's throne and mats that covered the entire floor. The protocol for meeting with the king was normally to arrive at the door and wait to be invited in by the king via his secretary. Once inside the room, one must not speak until the king initiated conversation. On my normal visits, Atchiba would greet me at the door, grab my hand and bring me to sit at his side. On this day, however, all royal protocols were followed. I was ushered into the room and seated in the far back

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[7] I intentionally use the term 'craft' here to indicate a process of developing a story with artistry and effective communicative intent while utilizing only the content of the biblical text — much in the same way an artisan might 'craft' a piece of furniture fit for use with artistry and imagination while only using the material available to him. In other words, to 'craft' a Bible story is to bring voice and life to the narrative text in a way that is appealing without creating meaning that is not extant in the text. For further discussion on crafting see: International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2005a:76).

corner. I was very obviously invited as an observer rather than a full participant. I arrived at the hour requested, which meant I was two hours early, so I sat next to my friend Fuudu and discussed the happenings of the day as I tried to understand what was about to happen. Fuudu seemed nervous and somewhat worried about my safety. After all, it would be a great shame upon him if anything were to happen to me, his guest.

Once all the parties arrived, there were nearly 70 men in the room. All the older men sat around the edges of the room. The younger men sat in the middle of the room. Only after everyone else was seated did King Atchiba enter. He was wearing his full kingly regalia. He entered and sat on the throne in silence. He whispered something to his secretary, who then invited the two warring parties to speak, starting with the Djeriwo. Hours elapsed as every man sitting in the room was allowed to speak for as long as he wanted. Priority was given to the older men. Some laid claim to the land, others laid out their grievances for violence perpetrated against them. Tensions began to rise as past offences were brought back to light. The men discussed and debated their Anii history. Once everyone had spoken, it was time for the king to speak judgement.

'In the beginning, God was there. Nothing else was there. He decided to make the world and everything in it.' I was shocked to hear King Atchiba telling the biblical story of the creation of the world during such a tense moment. As he spoke, the room became silent. The children and women, who looking in from the courtyard, were still. The words of the king transfixed everyone. The king told the story of the creation of the world and people from Genesis, chapters one and two – the story we had crafted and shared with him earlier that year. Once the king ended the story, he stopped talking. The room stayed silent for another fifteen minutes. Suddenly the offending and offended parties stood up, hugged one another, and walked out of the room. I went home thrilled that the king had not only remembered the story but used it at such a critical time. I was also dumbfounded

by the response of the people and the effect of the story. There was now peace. The violence ended, and the dispute did not come back up.

Later, during one of my normal visits to the king, I had to ask what he had done and how he had brought peace. Were there other discussions of which I was not aware? Had the group somehow come to consensus before he told the story? What was I missing? When I asked my questions, Atchiba laughed with the prolonged cackling laugh of an old man. He stared at me and said, 'I thought you said these were God's words? Why wouldn't they work?' I responded that I believed God's words were powerful, but I wanted to know *how* they worked. The king explained to me, 'God, he created the world. It all belongs to him. The only thing he gave to the man was the woman. God was here [in Bassila] before any of us. We all came here. The only thing God gave us was each other.' In other words, all the land belongs to God. The Anii people only borrow the land from God. The only thing they "own" is their relationships to one another. As the community listened to Atchiba tell the story, somehow they understood that disputes over land should not come between those relationships.

In later years, as I learned more about orality and interacted with more oral scholars, I would come to better understand the many principles of orality at play in King Atchiba's judgement. The Anii people are an oral people, which means that they place high values on communal decision-making and narrative communication. I came to understand King Atchiba's judgement as both a narrative-based judgement and a performance. The judgement took place within the bounds of a ritual that was culturally mandated and determined. Every member of the community knew their place in the room. They knew their places literally: the old men sat on the mats at the edges of the room; the young men sat on the mats in the middle of the room; the king sat on his throne at the front of the room; the women and children looked in from outside the room; the accepted outsider was tucked away in a corner. But community members also knew their places in the ritual

itself — their roles in the judgement. The old men had permission and time to air their grievances, and every older man was allowed a turn; the assistant whispered with the king and spoke for the king; the king pronounced his judgement. Knowing their roles, everyone played their part. The community aired their grievances. The king responded with narration, telling the community a story that reminded them of a central truth — that God gave the members of the community to each other.

That narration spoke to the hearts of the highly oral community. As a story, it called to mind the community's collective memory and reframed their communal conflict. But that narration had power because it took place within a recognized performance. The narration hit the heart of the community because it was placed within a dialectical discussion of the communal conflict and interacted with a recognized performance of conflict resolution.

King Atchiba's judgement serves as the ideal starting point for my explorations of orality within this chapter. On the surface, it perfectly demonstrates the contentions of narrative theology — a narrative retelling of a biblical story is at its epicentre — but dig a little deeper and we find extra dimensions of embodiment and community to the performance of this judgement that show it serves better as an illustration of theo-drama.

2.3   Orality, Narrative, and Drama

Was King Atchiba engaging in theological reflection? Or was he simply telling a story? His answer to the warring families was not an exposition of text in which he extracted propositional arguments based on careful logical argumentation. However, King Atchiba did engage in oral theologizing. He did so by telling a story, but, as I will argue in the following sections, there was more to the storytelling event than the story.

2.3.1 Opposition to Narrative Theology and Oral Theologizing

Others might not agree that King Atchiba engaged in theology. Reformed theologian Charles Hodge would certainly not think so, because King Atchiba did not engage in a scientific enquiry examining the facts as presented in the Bible (Hodge 1997:21). Conservative evangelical theologian Millard Erickson would agree with Hodge that proper theologizing is a science that requires exegesis and the formulation of theological propositions from the text (Erickson 1992:16–17). For Erickson, the use of narrative is most helpful as an illustration of such propositional truth (1992:17). This viewpoint on biblical narrative is shared by the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention, one of the largest and most theologically conservative American denominational mission agencies. The document, known as the *Foundations* document, explicates the core convictions, methods, and practices of its missionaries. The *Foundations* states that the interpretation of the narrative portions of Scripture is normal but not normative (International Mission Board 2018:147):

> Unless the example of the early Christians in Acts matches a command or teaching found elsewhere in Scripture, that example may be permissive and instructive, but not prescriptive…It [the Book of Acts] cannot stand alone…in forming our missionary strategies or our understanding of the life of the church or the life of a Christian…As with other types of biblical narrative, it must be interpreted hand in hand with other parts of Scripture and in light of the clearly didactic teaching in other places. (2018:141–2)

The above statement was intended to be a corrective of overzealous missionaries who used biblical narratives as warrants for their own missiological methods. However, the last line moves beyond guardrails for missiological method to a hermeneutical stance that places an entire genre of Scripture — narrative — as subsidiary to didactic genres of Scripture. To be sure, all Scripture should be interpreted 'hand in hand' with other parts of Scripture, but the *Foundations* document gives no mention of interpreting didactic portions of Scripture 'hand in hand' with the narrative portions. The assumption that narrative cannot stand on its own unless it can be broken down into component parts

through scientific enquiry and then restructured into propositional truth statements leads to an intellectual elitism that disregards the hermeneutical preferences of oral learners.

The authors of the IMB's 'Foundations' document were influenced by the 9Marks movement, a version of reformed theology and ecclesiology out of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. (Dever 2013). Andy Johnson, the associate pastor of Capitol Hill, is the resident missiologist for the movement who wrote its book on missions (Johnson 2017). He warns that consideration of orality in missions is an overly pragmatic exercise that denies the centrality of Scripture in theology and mission methods. Johnson's concern is that orality strategies are attractional strategies that focus too much on the receptor culture at the expense of the biblical mandate to preach and teach doctrine from Scripture. Johnson explains that he is 'not a vocational missionary myself. I've never lived overseas for more than six months' (Johnson 2009:9). Yet he accuses methods which take into account orality as practicing 'pragmatic idolatries' (2009:11). Johnson's concern is that focusing on methods of contextualization and multiplication denies the authority of Scripture.

Johnson holds up Dutch Reformed missionary JH Bavinck as his example of faithful mission practice. Bavinck challenges missionaries to consider principles from the Bible as the only source for solutions to the practical problems of missions (Bavinck et al. 2013). Johnson uses Bavinck's focus on Scripture to decry missiological methods that consider culture or worldview issues, arguing that such methods do not place proper weight on the centrality and importance of Scripture. Yet Johnson's conclusions are inconsistent with Bavinck's approach. Bavinck did have a high view of Scripture. At the same time, he was certainly concerned with the culture in which he ministered. In fact, he had a desire to see indigenous contextual theology develop from the local church, writing, 'We are always profoundly aware that an indigenous Christian theology needs to be developed, both in India and on Java, one that works through struggles with Islamic

mysticism and Hinduism' (Bavinck et al. 2013:304). Bavinck understood the necessity of local theologizing which takes into account the worldview and local culture of those served.

The task of the missionary is not to do the theology of local cultures (Hiebert 2006:297; Tiénou 2006:40–41). For Hiebert, the task of a missionary is to be a mediator of a theological framework by which local cultures may theologize. The truth of Scripture in the vernacular language is foundational to Hiebert's metatheological framework that informs and guides local theology. It is also the normative authority for local theologizing, but the methods of doing such local theologizing will depend upon the particular local context. Hiebert writes:

> For those committed to the authority of Scripture as divine revelation, not simply human reflections, there is a common basis from which to begin. Moreover, theology is more than affirming a set of propositions about truth; it involves living that truth by being committed followers of Jesus Christ as Lord. Globally, we need to discuss what that means in each of our local contexts. (2006:302–3)

A metatheological framework for oral theologizing, then, is founded on the authority of Scripture, the metanarrative of its canon, and its truth claims. As with all theology, it is contextual (Cartledge 2008:98–100). As such, the method of doing theology is based on the cultural context in which theologizing is done (Green 2009:12–3; Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:14). As people from oral cultures engage in doing theology for themselves, it stands to reason that they would use an oral framework for theologizing.

Traditionally, the starting point for oral theologizing has been narrative theology. The following sections will discuss narrative in light of orality studies. After discussing narrative and orality, I will propose drama as a more appropriate category for oral theology. The more appropriate framework for oral theologizing would subsequently be theo-drama — God's drama.

2.3.2 Orality and Narrative

Narrative played an obvious role in King Atchiba's theologizing: he told a story. 'An oral culture lives by storytelling' (Sample 2008:4). But in order to understand the role narrative played in King Atchiba's theologizing, it is important to first understand narrative. This section will describe the relationship between story and narrative and explore narrative's discursive nature.

As previously mentioned, orality studies have privileged the genre of narrative, particularly storytelling (Koehler 2010; Steffen and Bjoraker 2020; Ong 2012). At the same time, oralists have not treated narrative in uniform categories. Some, like Tex Sample, focus on the performative aspects of storytelling for practical theological purposes while others, like Walter Ong, treat narrative as a literary genre (Ong 2012; Sample 1994a). Some of these differing descriptions of narrative suffer from the confusion between story and narrative. When viewing narrative as a literary genre, narrativists often focus on the *structure* of the narrative itself — but in the case of performative storytelling, the *discursive* features of narrative are at the forefront. In fact, some of the complications of oral narrative understanding as outlined by Ong might be explained by the difference between narrative as structured story and narrative as a discursive event, differences which will be discussed below (Ong 2012:129–55).

Before moving forward, Chatman's description of narrative structure will help clarify the concept of narrative (Chatman 1978). Chatman uses a structuralist approach to narrative. Like Ricoeur, he borrows from Saussure's famous distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (words). For Chatman, 'narratives are *langues* conveyed by the *paroles* of concrete verbal or other forms of communication' (1978:24). In other words, narrative consists of both content and expression (1978:19). The story itself is the content. A story consists of existents: characters and settings. A story portrays events: actions and happenings. Story also includes those people and things presupposed by the author (1978:26).

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres… Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. (Barthes and Duisit 1975:237)

The expression of the story is the narrative, or more accurately, the narrative's discourse, which consists of the structure of the narrative transmission and its manifestation (1978:26). The discourse of a narrative consists of an intentional constructing of the story in such a way that the intended meaning is understood by the recipient of the story (Genette 1990:27–32). In oral narrative, this discourse is an oral event involving a teller, a story, and a hearer (Ricoeur 1968:120–21). This communication triad is essential in oral narrative discourse. Werner Kelber calls this the 'oral synthesis' (Kelber 1983:147):

Language and being, speaker, message, and words are joined together into a kind of unity. This powerful and binding quality of oral speech we shall henceforth refer to as *oral synthesis* (1983:19). Oral synthesis creates a tense world of personal loyalties and betrayals. Not only is the message inseparable from the speaker, but the speaker is as important to the recipients as his message. (1983:147)

This oral synthesis was certainly at play when King Atchiba engaged in his narrative discourse. He and his audience were intimately acquainted. Not only did he have positional authority to speak as judge and king, he also had the trust of his audience. Atchiba was the wisest of wise men. He came from a neutral family. He was known for being fair. He exhibited this fairness by allowing everyone in the room to speak (except for the accepted outsider, who was allowed to sit in the corner of the room). The hours of storytelling and circular discussion of every person in the room moved the judgement from story to discourse, from judgement to discursive event. Everyone in the room had been heard. Relationships were established or re-established. Then Atchiba chose the story and the moment of telling the story that would speak to their hearts and move them to action. His narrative moved from storytelling as entertainment to storytelling as judgement.

Chatman describes this aspect of narrative discourse in terms of speech-act theory (Chatman 1978:161). English philosopher John Austin developed speech-act theory

(Austin 1962). In this theory, the narrator tells a story (the locutionary aspect) for an intended outcome (the illocutionary aspect) and for an effect on the hearer (the perlocutionary aspect) (Chatman 1978:161). In speech-act parlance, King Atchiba told the creation story (the locutionary aspect) in order to pass judgement (the illocutionary aspect) and instil unity in the hearts of his people (the perlocutionary aspect).

The description of Atchiba's judgement illustrates multiple aspects of orality: (1) the use of narrative; (2) a high degree of relationality and community; (3) ritual, in that he chose the culturally appropriate time, place and manner for narrating the biblical story; (4) embodiment of the perceived wisdom of the text that led to changed hearts and changed actions. Atchiba did not just 'tell a story': he engaged in oral theologizing that utilized narrative discourse to form community and embody truth. Though Atchiba did not articulate his doctrine in his theologizing, he did appeal to the doctrine of creation. In so doing, his hearers understood God as the creator and giver of all things, and, as a result, understood that only God has a rightful claim on land. People are created beings who have only what God has given them. King Atchiba's listeners not only understood the clear call for restored unity, but they also appropriated its meaning into their lives and relationships.

2.3.3   Orality, Narrative, and Embodied Epistemology

As King Atchiba demonstrated, narrative discourse within orality also serves an important function: as a way to embody knowledge. This embodiment of knowledge is a key theme of Christian anthropologist Tex Sample, who focused on oral peoples of the American South (Sample 2008). He describes storytelling, or narration, as an essential tool for the oral person. When knowledge is not stored on paper, but in memory, recall becomes essential. Sample found that the oral peoples he studied used stories to store information, emotion, and local wisdom. These stories provided the mnemonic framework for memory storage, and the narration of the stories provide the means of

access to those memories (Sample 1994b:15–20). The performance within the storytelling event provides a means, not only of recall, but of accessing the amassed wisdom of a culture.

As such, narrative preserves and disseminates the habits and social conventions of society. Havelock described the epic narratives of oral societies as their 'encyclopediae' (Havelock 1963:61–6). According to Havelock, highly textual societies develop their encyclopaedic knowledge and store them in written form, while oral societies are technologically limited to performance-based reproduction of knowledge and memory. Although the technological determinism in that statement has been contested (Finnegan 1988; Street 1995b), many agree that oral cultures tend to store and retrieve knowledge through performative communication styles. Narrative as performance, then, becomes a critical epistemic tool for oral societies.

In his seminal work on orality, Ong privileged narrative over other genres in oral communication. He wrote: 'Oral cultures tend not to organize knowledge into elaborate, scientific categories. They tend to use narrative as the means of organizing and systematizing knowledge' (Ong 2012:137). Ong argues that narrative in oral societies operates quite differently than narrative in textual societies. Narrative in textual societies tend to follow a standard model of emplotment. He describes this as Freytag's pyramid structure that follows a linear plot arch with rising actions, climax, resolution, and conclusion (Ong 2012:147–9). Oral narratives, however, can be circular or episodic.

Ong uses Parry and Lord's literary criticism of Homeric epics to give examples of how oral people experience narrative. Parry and Lord both studied Homeric epics, which were meant to be dramatized, and Yugoslavian epics, which were meant to be performed before a live audience. In both types of epic performances, oral communication relies upon audience participation in the narrative. Oral language is bound up with a physiological, social, and environmental contextuality. Gestures and facial expressions,

pitch and tone of voice, economic and political experiences, and the very locale of discoursing are crucial determinants in the shaping of meaning (Kelber 1983:109).

Oral narrative often focuses on mnemonic devices which do not always have a linear plot structure. Characters in oral narrative are "heavy" in that they are not highly developed (Ong 2012:151). The characters are often "types" that reflect not only literary conventions of the day but also the assumed values of that culture. Oral stories focus on characters' involvement in the action to move the plot forward. The interaction between characters has less to do with instigating self-reflection in the audience and more to do with allowing the audience to recall the basic plot of the story. The audience plays a significant role in the performance. Oral narrative invites participation on the part of the audience as a means of remembering the story. Goody referred to this as *generative* memory (Kelber 2006:15; Goody 1987b:180). Oral cultural memory functions in a generative manner in which the fidelity to primary message is preferred over precision in recall, and both the narrator and the audience play a role in recall.

For Ong, narrative discourse is an *event*, a shared experience that happens in real-time. Narrative discourse invites participation in which oral learners actively seek understanding. Oral narrative discourse is an intersubjective endeavour (Maxey 2009:100). Intersubjectivity is more reliant upon narrative discourse than upon procedures associated with the theory of the mind (Gallagher 2006:226; Nelson 2007:191–2). In other words, it is in placing an action into a coherent narrative that a person makes sense of that action, his relation to the action, and his relation to others as a result of that action (Ricoeur 2008b:238). Both the narrator and the audience play a role in the construction of the narrative (Abbott 2008:15–21). There is a distinct relationship formed between narrator and the audience. Gadamer described this type of relational understanding as the fusion of two horizons (Gadamer 1975b:405). Communication happens when the cognitive contexts of two people intersect. In turn, the narrators invite

the audience to indwell the world of the story, thereby facilitating a relationship between themselves, the audience and the story itself — a fusion of three horizons. The narrator, the audience, and the story are indelibly linked so that the interaction between the teller and the audience informs the mode and method of telling the story. This 'oral synthesis' creates not only meaning but also community and action in the real world.

Oral communicators tend to prefer communication and cognitive categorization that is related to the real world (Ong 2012:42; Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:140). As mentioned previously, Ong used the research of developmental psychologist Alexander Luria to show the situatedness of oral cognition and categorization. Luria presented illiterate research subjects with a series of geometric objects: a circle and a square. When asked to identify the objects, the answers were always related to real-life objects: a ball or plate instead of a circle, a mirror or house instead of a square (Luria 1976b:32–9). Luria's research shows a strong tendency among illiterate, oral communicators to favour concrete, real-life cognition over abstract, propositional cognition. Oral learners are concrete, relational, and experiential learners (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:140–41). Therefore, narrative discourse allows oral learners to inhabit the world of the story being narrated so that they vicariously experience the emotions, discoveries, and context of the story (Mar 2011:1429–30; Ricœur 2013:134–40).

2.4   Narrative and Theology

Narrative discourse not only plays a role in oral communication and epistemology, but, for narrative theologians, it is the starting point for theology and theologizing. The metanarrative of Scripture is both the framework for and the material of Christian theology. Evangelical theologian D. A. Carson, though not himself a narrative theologian, refers to the critical nature of the narrative as he describes Paul's theology. He writes that Paul understands that 'without the big story, without the metanarrative, the little story or

the little expression becomes either incoherent or positively misleading' (Carson 2000:384).

Narrative theologians embraced narrative as the material and the method of theology. Narrative theology gained popularity with the onset of postliberal theology. It was further embraced throughout the postmodern era. Postmoderns and postliberals alike rejected the positivist and foundational epistemologies of Enlightenment-era modernist theology. Postliberalism, as evidence by its name, was a reaction against the subjectivism of liberal theology. Postmodernism rejected the concept of an overarching metanarrative that purported absolute, knowable truth and universal rationality (Lyotard 1979).

Narrative theology promised a way forward towards both cultural particularity and relative rationality. Theology for the narrativist focuses on the biblical narratives; propositional truth claims are perspectival and are derivative from the biblical narrative. Thought is closely aligned with practice. The narrativist position is closely related to postmodernism, rejecting universal reason in favour of an epistemology that is dependent upon the pre-understandings of the subject within the context of the world in which he lives:

> There is no issue of theological substance detachable from the stories' substance. That is, these recountings of the Exodus and the Christ are not fables, such that once their point or moral has been gleaned, the actual narratives can then be discarded. (Goldberg 1991:15)

Theology, then, cannot be divorced from the biblical narrative. Theology is not a task of exhibiting self-evident doctrine or universal morality. It shows that certain doctrines are coherent interpretations of the biblical narrative and that certain moral practices and choices 'fit' that narrative. Narrative theology then is a practice of 'fittingness' rather than a practice in disembodied reason.

2.4.1 Epic, Lyric, and Dramatic Theology

The question remains whether or not narrative theology is the best, or even a sufficient, method for oral theologizing. In order to examine this question more fully, this section will now turn to a seemingly odd bedfellow, bastion of Enlightenment and modernist German philosophy Georg Hegel (Quash 2005:51). Hegel's philosophy sought an absolute knowledge based on right judgement and historically determined concepts (Davie et al. 2016:loc.15073). In relation to narrative, Hegel developed a typology based on epic, lyric, and dramatic categories in the culmination of his *Aesthetics* (Hegel 1975; Quash 2005:41). According to Hegel, 'epic narrative' is an objectivist perspective on narrative concerned with the facts narrated by an objective teller who does not interject feelings or intuitions (D. Ford 2011:25). By contrast, 'lyric narrative' is highly subjective. Lyric is not as concerned with objective reality as it is with experience and expressions (Wells 2018a:29). Thus, for Hegel, drama was the height of artistic expression as it merged both the epic and lyric tendencies (Quash 1997:293). Hegel's typology was foundational to Swiss catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar's development of a theo-dramatic theology. Von Balthasar states Hegel's typology 'touches the nerve' of addressing theology on dramatic terms (Balthasar 1988:loc. 768).

> Von Balthasar takes up Hegel's distinction between epic, lyric and dramatic, shows how each can be used to characterize the relation of God's action to the world and to people, and concludes that the dramatic (in this case the *theo-dramatic*) must have priority. Each of the first two perspectives (epic and lyric) is important but incomplete without its joint presence in the third, dramatic perspective. (Quash 2005:41)

Examples of 'incomplete' theologizing abound, both from the epic as well as the lyric points of view. Epic narrative theologizing focuses on reporting what God has done from the vantage point of an external objective observer. In contrast, lyric narrative theologizing engages in dialogue between God and the one theologizing in a local context (Khovacs 2007:4).

2.4.1.1 <u>The 'Fifth Gospel' as Lyric Narrative Theologizing</u>

Placing local theology into the typography of lyric, epic, and drama demonstrates how drama might assuage the concerns of epic with lyric subjectivism while maintaining the strengths of lyric methodology.

Catholic professor of theology, Robert Schreiter, explores how local theologies are developed (Schreiter 1985). He advocates for a contextual model for local theologizing. In his contextual model, Schreiter places questions of identity, continuity, and social change in a particular context (1985:17–8). The contextual model advocates for theology that is concerned with real-world issues in a local community. This is not a received theology; it is a constructed theology dependent upon the experiences and traditions of local communities. Local tradition becomes both a source and authority for local theology (Schreiter 1985:36–40). God is understood dialogically through the lens of the local culture.

Two other Catholic theologians, Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, have advocated a version of local, specifically African, narrative theology (Healey and Sybertz 1996). Healey and Sybertz developed their framework of African narrative theology through their decades of work as expatriate missionaries in East Africa. Schreiter lauds Healey and Sybertz:

> This book by Healey and Sybertz tackles the challenge of theology in oral cultures head-on. It goes directly to those modes of expression that carry an oral culture's information and values – proverbs, riddles, stories and myths – and proposes how these might become the basis for a local theology shaped in the language of the people… their close collaboration with local people in this project permit a genuinely local theology to emerge. (Healey and Sybertz 1996:9–10)

Healey and Sybertz advocate for a guiding metaphor in their theology that they call the 'Fifth Gospel'. Though this term has been used variously to refer to different theological works, such as the Book of Isaiah or the apocryphal Book of Thomas, for Healey and Sybertz the metaphor of the Fifth Gospel refers to local African stories of faith (1996:32–4). These stories reflect the ongoing revelation of God in African cultures. The

symbolism, stories, proverbs, and songs of African Traditional Religion then become a source for understanding and appropriating, or to use Healey's preferred term, enculturating, the Christian faith. The oral literature and tradition of African societies become a key source in theology. African narrative theology becomes a theology of the African narrative in dialogue with the biblical narrative.

Anglican vicar and Ghanaian theologian John Pobee agrees with Healey and Sybertz. He presented a paper to a conference of Christian archivists in which he explicates his understanding of an African oral theology, arguing for the pre-eminence of local narrative traditions as well as stories of religious experiences as the source of an African oral theology (Pobee 1989). He believes that art forms, liturgy, ceremonies, and symbols are crucial to African oral theology (1989:91). Christian tradition takes pride of place in these art forms.

> Africans come to church with all the oral communication skills they have inherited down the ages. The majority of African Christians live in rural areas of unschooled people who are not comfortable with literacy. The very existence of the church in these places is testimony to the fact that their faith through history, experiences and responses are being preserved and handed down orally. (1989:88)

For Pobee, this theology of oral tradition is a genuine African theology that speaks to the needs and understandings of African people. Pobee says that being alert to the place and significance of this type of oral theology is akin to having a threefold conversion experience: (1) a shift from text to oral, because many people in the world communicate first of all through art; (2) shifting way from the colonialism of Christendom to the grassroots of theology; (3) using local mother tongue languages of the people (1989:89–91).

Fellow Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako, urges the use of traditional African narratives for theologizing as well. In his manifesto on African theology (Bediako 1996), Bediako suggests that African Traditional Religions are key sources for African theology and the ongoing practices of Christian communities. The wisdom of African primal religions can be accessed via their oral traditions. In his Laing Lecture, Bediako describes

how one may go about utilizing these oral traditions for theologizing (Bediako 1993). For example, Bediako reflects upon an oral tradition by an illiterate Christian woman. He describes her as a theologian who is not only exhibiting the kind of vibrant spirituality endemic in African Christianity, but also reflecting an important feature of her African primal religion: a keen sense of nature. He walks through the transcription of the oral tradition to show how this woman intricately weaves her own experiences with both the tradition of her primal religion and the tradition of her Christian religion. In so doing, she articulates a rich tapestry of theological understanding which speaks powerfully to her community (Bediako 1993:12–20).

This type of theologizing is lyric in that the starting point for theologizing is the culture of the theologian. Theologizing is seen as a dialogue between God and culture. For local theologizing in the vein of Healey and Sybertz, the culture of the local community takes the lead. There is of course a danger that the theological understanding of the local community may not accord with Scripture and a type of syncretism may occur.

2.4.1.2   An Epic Response and Dramatic Solution

Theologizing that starts from the point of view of African oral tradition does not ignore Scripture, but it does cause concern for theologians coming from an epic mindset. Critics to local narrative theology, like 9Marks missiologist Andy Johnson (introduced earlier in this chapter), disavow lyric approaches out of a strong commitment to rely solely upon Scripture. For the epic theologian, Scripture is the sole source of norms and authority in theology. This epic voice is often clearly heard in advocates for systematic theology, a theology which carefully appropriates the textual and historical traditions of God's Word and actions into a systematised set of propositions (Quash 2005:41).

Drama bridges the gap between the epic and lyric approaches: it guards the spirituality and intimate relational and cultural dynamics of lyric theologizing while following the script of Scripture.

2.5   The Future of Oral Theology

The narrative turn in theology has been a refreshing and fruitful advance in theological method, moving away from the universalist, abstract, and propositional approaches of modernist theological method. At the same time, the epic appeal to Scriptural authority and the lyric desire for contextual relevance must work in tandem in oral theologizing. Take, for example, how King Atchiba appealed to the authority of Scripture in his judgement while also taking into account the dialogical and discursive nature of theologizing.

Drama encompasses both the lyric and epic narrative approaches. In his manifesto on *The Future of Christian Theology,* David Ford identifies drama as the future of theology:

> At its best, drama is able to embrace the objective and the subjective, to maintain a sense of plot and purpose without suppressing individuality, diversity, and the complexity of levels, perspectives, motivations, and ideas. It can have epic detachment and lyric intensity and enable a coherence without assuming one overview. (D. Ford 2011:26)

The future of theology is drama. More specifically, as will be discussed below, the future of oral theologizing is theo-dramatic. King Atchiba's oral theologizing was theo-dramatic in that he started with God's Word, the biblical narrative. He invited the group to not only listen to the story but also to participate in its meaning and outworking in community. The next section will explore the theo-dramatic framework of Vanhoozer's theatrical model.

2.6 From Narrative Theology to Theo-dramatic Theology

> We all live story-shaped lives. The issue is not whether we will do so; the issue is rather which are the stories that will shape our lives?…the story that most decisively shapes our lives must be the biblical story. (Wolterstorff 1995:212)

Theo-dramatic theology, particularly the theatrical model espoused by Vanhoozer, brings the discursive nature of the biblical narrative to centre stage. The triune God is the author and primary actor in the drama. Christian disciples are not only the receptors of the story/theo-drama, but they embody the drama by becoming a part of the theo-drama, enacting it in different space-time and cultural contexts. The intelligibility and credibility of the biblical narrative comes from Christian disciples gainfully performing the theo-drama (Vander Lugt 2014a:19). The following section will describe Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic theology and four of its aspects: relationship, embodiment, participation, and community.

2.6.1 Vanhoozer's Theo-dramatic Theology

The theo-drama of the Bible is a matter of what God (*theos*) has said and done (*draō)*. It is the story of God's interaction with this world and humanity. The term theo-drama was coined by von Balthasar in his five-volume treatise *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. For von Balthasar, God is the ultimate protagonist who has initiated a great redemption story (Balthasar 1990). Vanhoozer builds upon von Balthasar's insistence that drama is implicit in theology. For Vanhoozer, the gospel itself is a dramatic happening: God has acted in this world by bringing humanity into relationship with himself.

Therefore, drama is not a foreign conceptual framework imposed on theology. It is the stuff from which theology is made (Vanhoozer 2005:38).

> . . .all of today's influential theological trends — aware of the inadequacies of systematics as practiced so far — converge toward a theological dramatic theory yet without being able to reach it; this is in part because they are not aware of their mutual convergence… It is time, therefore, to attempt a synthesis: theology is pressing for it from within, and from outside — from drama. (Balthasar 1988:loc. 1768)

2.6.2   Theo-drama as Relationship with the Triune God

Relational participation in God's communicative action is the goal of Vanhoozer's theo-dramatics. The triune God in communicative action is the subject of Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic theology (Vanhoozer 2010:282–3). Vanhoozer guides his method to the matter of his theo-dramatic theology:[8]

> The subject matter of the Bible, God's redemptive words and deeds in the history of Israel that culminates in Jesus Christ, is inherently theo-dramatic, a matter of what God (theos) has said and done (draō) in history. At the heart of Christianity is not merely an idea of God but rather God's self-communicating words and acts. The gospel is not a universal truth but an announcement of God's saving work in Christ. (Vanhoozer 2014:20–1)

Vanhoozer speaks of the Old Testament and New Testament theo-drama in light of what he calls the economy of the Gospel. He uses the term economy in the sense of *oikonomia*, which refers to an ordered plan (Vanhoozer 2005:42). In the Bible, this term most often referred to the ordered management of the *oikos* or 'household'. In other words, the Gospel is not a fortuitous event that happened at a moment in history — it was planned from the beginning of time. This plan was to work out salvation — the bringing of humans into relationship with God — throughout history in relation to the economic Trinity. This outworking of God's eternal plan is the theo-drama. The Bible is God's revelation of the theo-drama.

Vanhoozer refers to the economic Trinity to describe God's progressive revelation of himself throughout time. This progressive revelation unfurls through the biblical narrative. The triune union of God is progressively revealed through the narrative, and the *telos* of this emplotted narrative is that, through the Gospel, humankind is invited to enter into this relational communion (2005:41–3).

In other words, the gospel invites people to enter into the *theo-drama*. The *theo-drama* of the Bible is the story of God's creation and ultimate redemption of humankind.

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[8] Vanhoozer follows noted Protestant theologian Karl Barth who insisted on a Christocentric approach to theology. The method for such a theology should be focused on God's revelation of himself. (Barth 1979:loc. 309, 580)

Scripture is the revelation of God through the theo-drama. The gospel is the theo-drama; humanity is invited into the theo-drama to play an active role. In so doing, they become active participants in the eternal communion between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This 'entering into' or 'indwelling' of the narrative moves theology beyond narrative to drama. The Trinity becomes 'an identity of the *dramatis personae* and… the précis of the drama itself. "He is risen indeed!"' (2005:44).

Vanhoozer explores the concept of speech-act theory as it relates to Scripture and theology. This leads him to drama. In *The Drama of Doctrine* (2005), Vanhoozer extends von Balthasar's conceptualization of theology through theo-drama. Von Balthasar saw theo-dramatics as a basic requirement for the Christian life (Balthasar 1988:loc.1585). The love for humanity that God expresses and the hope that love engenders is not realized through rational systems of truths to be believed but found in a living relationship with the Creator. Theo-drama enables that sort of relationship. And, according to von Balthasar, 'Now is the time for questioning (the status quo of modern theology) and playing one's part' (1988:loc.1768).

British theologian Ben Quash critiqued von Balthasar's conception of theo-drama as not providing the necessary structure for truly living in relationship with the Creator or relationship with others. Quash asserts that von Balthasar's theo-dramatics fail to provide a theology of particularity that he says must drive a theological treatment of history (Quash 2005:197–8). Quash agrees with Vanhoozer that the triune love of the Father, Son, and Spirit is at the heart of theo-dramatics (2005:215–6). However, it is only in applying a *pneumatology* to narrative that one can achieve this relationship. The Spirit enables Christian disciples to enter into relationship with the triune God and his communicative acts.

For Vanhoozer this pneumatological dimension of the human-divine relationship enables participation. Fittingly participating in God's communicative action is only

possible as the Spirit enables Christian disciples to respond to the Father through the Son (Vanhoozer 2010:294).

> The drama of doctrine has nothing to do with pretending but everything to do with participating in the once-for-all mission of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Such participation is neither play-acting nor a matter of Platonic ontology. Christian participation is rather pneumatic: those who participate in the theo-dramatic missions do so through union with Christ, a union that is wrought by the Spirit yet worked out in history by us. (Vanhoozer 2005:366)

In this approach, there is dual relational responsibility. Human participation in the theo-drama is only made possible through the Spirit. At the same time, the disciple is required to fittingly participate in the theo-drama through obedience to the canon of Scripture and the indwelling of the theo-drama. Engaging with the biblical theo-drama brings a fuller understanding of the triune God and the work of the Spirit (Yong 2014:loc. 6032).

2.6.3   Theo-drama and Embodiment

> The drama of doctrine, summarized by creedal Christianity, is a model not only for viewing but also for participating in reality. It is precisely this invitation to orient oneself in the world as an actor in the divine drama of redemption that makes theatrical theology superior to narrative theology. Disciples are not mere storytellers but story-dwellers. (Vanhoozer 2014:20–21)

Vanhoozer's claim that humans enter into the theo-drama of the Gospel is a claim that narrative theology is insufficient. Narrative theologians often treat drama as a sub-species of narrative. In fact, many narrative theologians rely upon Greek philosophical concepts such as Aristotle's *mythos,* the emplotted storyline, and *mimesis,* which describes how a story can represent or imitate real-life. It is ironic that these terms reflect the stage more than the book, yet they have been appropriated by literary narrativists who have forgotten the exhilaration of the performance of the drama. A narrative invites imagination of story-worlds. A dramatic imagination invites participation in those worlds.

Participation in this sense is a taking part in or indwelling the world of the story. Vanhoozer proposes that the drama, specifically *theo-drama*, is a more appropriate mode of understanding participation in the overarching story of the Bible than narrative.

Furthermore, the theatre, as the space where the drama is enacted, is a more appropriate model for the work of doing theology.

For Vanhoozer, the task of doing theology is not to build up systems of thought as much as it is to build worlds and indwell them. The world worth indwelling is the world created by God's theo-drama as revealed through the Bible (Vanhoozer 2009:loc. 2682). The embodied story of the Bible is the embodiment of the *mythos*, or emplotted story, of the Bible (Vanhoozer 2010:289). This emplotted story is the *theo-drama.* The hero of the *theo-drama* is the triune God in communicative action. Embodying this story then involves theo-dramatic participation in the communion within the Trinity.

Vanhoozer clearly distinguishes his understanding of participation — taking part in God's theo-drama and his communicative action — from the Neoplatonist views of proponents of radical orthodoxy who adhere to an ontological view of participation — the idea that humans participate in the divine nature. Vanhoozer's participation is a 'taking a part in' the theo-drama communicated by the triune God in communication with humanity. Humanity takes its place on the stage of the theo-drama, the world, in a particular time and place. This is the theo-drama made flesh. Christian disciples are to embody the theo-drama. In this sense, to embody the theo-drama is to live out the theo-drama.

2.6.4 Theo-drama as Participation

> Drama is a shaped sequence of action, especially dialogical action, with a beginning, middle, and end. Performance is the realization or actualization of drama. Theater is the space-time performance by which persons present themselves — their being — to others: ...Speaking is the preeminent human communicative activity. The theater is thus the space-time of dialogical action. (Vanhoozer 2005:29)

For Vanhoozer, theo-dramatic theology is faith embodying and speaking understanding by *participating* in 'what the triune God — Father, Son, and Spirit — is doing in and through Christ for the salvation of the world' (Vanhoozer 2014:29). Human participation in the divine triune relationship involves not only an 'entering into' the eternal

communion, but also playing an active 'role' in the theo-drama itself. As such, disciples no longer simply indwell the world of the story, but they conform to the story and engage not only with the story but also the other actors in the story as well as the storyteller (God in triune communication).[9]

How do Christian disciples live out the theo-drama? What exactly are they to live out? Vanhoozer agrees with Anglican theologian N.T. Wright (1992), who describes how Christians are to see their place in the theo-drama.[10]

Wright's critical realist approach relies heavily on the idea of a controlling story, or metanarrative, which frames the worldview of a person or a people. This story guides their way-of-being-in-the-world: their beliefs, values, and actions. In a Christian worldview, this controlling story is the biblical narrative.[11] The mode in which a Christian is to be in the world, based on a biblical worldview, is through engagement with the story as a participant. Wright explains this way of being by using a Shakespearean play as a metaphor (Wright 1992:140–41). He asks the reader to imagine a five-act Shakespearean play whose final act has been lost. The first four acts would be the authoritative version of the play, but the final act would have to be worked out in an improvisatory fashion while remaining faithful to the first four 'authoritative' acts.[12] Wright explains that in Christian theology, Scripture provides the first four acts of the metanarrative: (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus. Christians are now living in the fifth act, left to work out a faithful performance. To be sure, the New Testament provides an understanding of the ultimate conclusion of the play, but the intervening period is left for interpretation. Wright posits:

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[9] Nicholas Wolterstorff sees conforming as a key means of indwelling or *living within* the biblical text. See (Wolterstorff 2001)

[10] Wright does not use the term theo-drama. He prefers *story.*

[11] Wright's use of controlling story bears striking resemblance to Von Balthasar's *theo-drama* discussed in the previous section.

[12] I will discuss the concept of improvisation in theology in detail in chapter 4: *The Church as Performer and Performance of Theology.*

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> The fact of Act 4 being what it is shows what sort of a conclusion the drama should have, without making clear all the intervening steps. The church would then live under the 'authority' of the extant story, being required to offer an improvisatory performance of the final act as it leads up to and anticipates the intended conclusion. The church is designed, according to this model, as a stage in the completion of the creator's work of art. (Wright 1992:141–2)

Embodying the theo-drama is not a matter of embodying any narrative. It requires a commitment to the reality and authority of Scripture which guides the actors into right living and right speaking. Living in the final act of the story requires participation which is faithful to the authoritative source of the theo-drama, the canon of Scripture.[13]

The nature of this role-playing in Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic theology is far from play-acting. The participation Vanhoozer advocates is one that brings the disciple into alignment with the theo-drama as it is revealed in God's communicative actions. The role that Christians play is similar to the role Wright assigns to Christians as they find themselves in the fifth act of the great play of history. Yet, the Vanhoozerian model requires agency and action on the part of Christian disciples in a way Wright's does not. They are not merely beings thrown into the world. Christian disciples are active participants who not only play roles, but in the process, become those roles. In this sense, Christian disciples are not simply role-playing, but role-becoming (Vanhoozer 2005:366). Thus, Vanhoozer's participation is less about *being* than it is about *becoming*. To be sure, there are ontological dimensions in the concept of becoming, but becoming requires action.

The active participation in both the economic Trinity as well as the theo-drama transforms the Christian disciple rather than simply informs them. As stated above, Vanhoozer differentiates his concept of participation from the Neoplatonist concept of participation found in the radical orthodoxy program (2014:36–40). Radical orthodoxy

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[13] Oral theologizing through faithful participation in the theo-drama as expressed through Scripture demands the questions, 'How can oral theologizing ensure faithfulness?' and 'How might oral theologizing appeal to norms and authority without traditional textual hermeneutical apparatus and without reference to the written text?' These questions are key questions for oral theologizing which will be addressed in other chapters.

propounds an ontological participation as its central theological framework (Milbank et al. 1999:3). This ontological perspective sees participation as a matter of humans participating in the transcendental divine schema (Plato's *mathesis)*. This participation comes through *being* itself rather than taking part in or *engaging* in the divine theo-drama, which is how Vanhoozer describes participation. Vanhoozer would respond that the gospel and salvation are not a matter of simply being, saying, 'I exist — therefore, I partake in the essence of God and his salvation'. Rather, participation in the theo-drama is a *doing* — an intentional engagement in the theo-drama. There is a performative aspect to theo-dramatic participation.

2.6.5 Theo-drama Forms Community

This performance is not done in isolation. Just as the theo-drama invites participation in the divine communion, it also creates a holy community of believers. As Christians are drawn into the communion that exists between Father, Spirit, and Son, they are drawn together by the Spirit. In exegeting John 17:20-23, trinitarian theologian Damon So explains that Christians who participate in the divine fellowship of the Trinity are knit together through the Spirit into this fellowship. This fellowship is the church, and this unity has a purpose. The church is to draw people into the human fellowship of the church with a view of drawing people into fellowship with the Triune God (So 2010:228).

Christian communities operate much like theatrical companies who work together as a community, using both past traditions and present communities to understand a script (the theo-drama) and perform it faithfully (Craigo-Snell 2000:479). Theatrical theologian Shannon Craig-Snell sees the Christian interpretation of the Bible as performative and embodied in nature. In this sense, church communities become the actors in the drama. The location where this discourse is embodied through worship and fitting performance of the theo-drama is the stage of the church (Craigo-Snell 2000:479–80).

Vanhoozer would say that the way in which the church embodies the theo-dramatic discourse is to believe and obey the message of the theo-drama (Vanhoozer 2014:35). 'In sum: the New Testament documents were written in order to involve — nay, *conscript* — the audience in the dramatic action of redemption' (2014a:35). The church, as it participates in and sets the stage for this theo-dramatic discourse, becomes interactive theatre in which the audience and actors engage with one another to enact the script. In this case, the church is the troupe of actors inviting a sometimes-unwilling audience to participate in the performance of the script, which is the theo-drama. In so doing, the church revives the discursive nature of theodramatic theology. Again, participation is not only a matter of being but also of action. The church takes part in the communicative action of the triune God. In so doing, the church makes the gospel intelligible to the world, proclaiming and instantiating it (Vanhoozer 2014:139–41).

2.7 Towards an Oral Theo-dramatic Theology

The previous section journeyed through the narrative and dramatic nature of orality. Despite opposition from modernist theologians and missiologists, I argued for a framework of theologizing based on the epistemology and characteristics of oral cultures. The prototypical approach to such an oral theology has been narrative. I argued for a turn to theo-drama in oral theologizing. The next section explored the theo-dramatic framework of Vanhoozer's theatrical model for theologizing and focused on relationship, embodiment, participation, and community.

In this section, I will evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of Vanhoozer's model as it pertains to oral theologizing. The subsections will parallel the themes of the previous section: relationship, embodiment, participation, and community.

2.7.1 Oral Theology as Relationship

Just as Vanhoozer's economy of the gospel invites believers to participate in the communion that exists within the Trinity, a theological *oikonomia* in an oral culture would likely begin and end with relationship. This is evident in Christian anthropologist and theological educator Michael Rynkiewich's description of his understanding of oral cultures based on his experiences in Kenya and Papua New Guinea (Rynkiewich 2007).

Rynkiewich suggested three core components of theological education in oral cultures. First, memory and cognition in oral societies are embodied. Rynkiewich uses 'embodiment' in the sense in which it is used in the cognitive sciences: the body and its immediate environment play a significant role in meaning-making, meaning-storage, and meaning-recall.[14] Second, for Rynkiewich, understanding and memory are not only embodied in the sense used by cognitive sciences, but also in the sense used by the social sciences. In other words, interpretation is not only corporeally embodied but also socially embodied. Thus, communal relations are often the interpretive key for understanding in oral cultures, which means community is at the core of oral hermeneutics. Third, the relationship between teacher and student is as critical to learning as the content of the learning, whether that content be oral storytelling or propositional teaching (Rynkiewich 2007:50–51).

Relationship is the key factor for Rynkiewich's description of orality. Relational dynamics play obvious roles in two of the three factors — community and student-teacher relationship. Knowledge and understanding only comes through relationship with others. The health of those relationships impact understanding, particularly within the power dynamics of the student-teacher relationship.

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[14] Ong refers to this interrelationship with the physical world and humanity as the *sensorum*, i.e. the world as perceived by the human senses (Ong 1967:1–6).

But what about the first component of Rynkiewich's description? At first glance, one would wonder what embodied cognition and memory have to do with relationship — but it is the relationship between the mind and the body. It is also the relationship of the body with the physical world. In oral cultures, memory itself is highly relational. The relational nature of memory is described in Werner Kelber's understanding of the generative memory in oral cultures. Generative memory is stored and reconstructed by oral communities (Kelber 2006). Thus, all three of Rynkiewkich's categories are highly relational.

Given the relational nature of oral cultures, a theological method (such as Vanhoozer's) that incorporates a high degree of relationship would seem to serve oral cultures well. This relational characteristic is inherent in the differences that Ong describes in narrative between oral and literate cultures (Ong 1967:292–313). As discussed above, narrative in oral cultures focuses on the discursive nature of narrative rather than simply the story itself. Unfortunately, many attempts at developing narrative theological approaches for oral cultures have focused simply on giving those cultures access to the biblical story (International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2005a; Dinkins 2006). Some have made strides in considering the discursive nature of narrative (Koehler 2010; Steffen and Bjoraker 2020); however, few if any have considered a theo-dramatic approach to oral theology.[15]

Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic approach invites people to enter into relationship with the object of theology, the triune God in divine communicative action, making it a promising starting point for oral cultures which highly value relationship. An oral theology then is not only 'faith seeking understanding', it is faith *living* understanding by

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[15] Yoakum did explore the suitability of Vanhoozer's Scripture principle as presented in *Drama of Doctrine* in his doctoral dissertation. Unfortunately, the work reads more like a manifesto to decry the lack of theological integrity in the Orality Movement rather than providing any direction for oral theology (Yoakum 2014).

participating fittingly in the divine theo-drama, *in community*. Embodiment of theological understanding comes from entering into relationship with the Father and Son through the Spirit. This is a real-life experience that connects the physical world with the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual world. Not only does the relational aspect of Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic oral theology suggest a move from narrative to theo-drama, but theo-drama also seeks to embody the biblical narrative. The next section will further explore how Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic call to embody the theo-drama might be useful for oral theology.

2.7.2   Oral Theology as Embodiment

As Christian disciples find themselves within God's theo-drama, they are guided by what has come before. Just as Wright's imaginary Shakespearean actor is guided and bound by the first four 'canonical' acts of the play, so too are Christian disciples who wish to participate in God's theo-drama fittingly.

Tom Boomershine was a New Testament professor who saw the value of treating the Bible as oral story. He believed that listeners are invited not simply to hear the word, but to enter into the story as an event (Boomershine 1988:52). In so doing, the listener is invited to respond, not told how to live and act appropriately. The indwelling of the biblical story becomes the interpretive key to life and godliness. For an oral culture, this is a key element to theological understanding.

In the same way, Randall Prior (2019) describes his work as a theological educator in the South Pacific. As he learned about the oral culture in which he was working, he saw the primacy of story and storytelling in communicating in oral cultures (2019:ch.4). Story became the central means of understanding and teaching. Many theological educators among oral learners have found similar story-based knowledge frames (Chiang and Lovejoy 2013). The worldview of oral cultures is intimately intertwined with the stories they indwell.

'God's purpose for the Bible is to give mankind a new story to live by, one that reflects the truth as God alone knows it and love as God alone shows it' (Brown 2004:26). Yet at the same time, it is insufficient to simply present a biblical story to an oral culture and hope for the best. The story to be indwelt is God's theo-drama as presented through the Bible. This becomes the guiding story in oral theology; otherwise, any story or experience may seem as normative to spiritual formation. Again, local narrative theologians rightly see oral theology as impacting the everyday lives of Christian disciples.

> The Christian way of life is in Africa to stay, certainly within the foreseeable future, [and] much of the theological activity in Christian Africa is being done as oral theology (in contrast to written theology) from the living experiences of Christians. It is theology in the open, from the pulpit, in the market-place, in the home as people pray or read and discuss the Scriptures... African Christianity cannot wait for written theology to keep pace with it... Academic theology can only come afterwards and examine the features retrospectively in order to understand them. (Mbiti 1986:229)

Oral theology is living experience. However, without the dual guides of Scripture and Spirit, oral theology is open to mismanagement and misunderstanding (Arnett 2017:58). This is where Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic approach to theology can be helpful for oral theology. In explaining how doctrine protects theology, Vanhoozer discusses the drama of doctrine as the drama behind the doctrine, in other words the theo-drama. The drama of doctrine is the church's attempt to make sense of the theo-drama as revealed through Scripture, and the drama in front of doctrine is the church's attempt to fittingly participate in the theo-drama (Vanhoozer 2014:26–7). God's theo-drama, as revealed in the Bible through the power of the Spirit, is the norming norm for theology. This truth provides oral theo-dramatic theology boundaries beyond a set of propositional truth statements to be followed.

> Theology's method must be appropriate to its matter: the speech and actions of God. The Christian faith is not a system of ideas or moral values but a five-act theo-drama in which God's speech and action play the decisive parts….the task of theology is to ensure that we are following rather than opposing Jesus Christ. (Vanhoozer 2005:57)

Oral theo-dramatic theology relies upon embodying the theo-drama. Theo-drama shapes and creates an oral Christian theological worldview. This sense of fitting participation has the potential to operate as a guard against and a corrective towards potential heresy in oral theology. The need to guard against heresy in oral theology is a particular concern for theologians and theological educators who wish to work among oral cultures. Vanhoozer's proposal for fitting theo-dramatic participation in the biblical story has the potential to allay their fears.

At the same time, Vanhoozer's model was not developed with oral communities in mind. The theo-dramatic model, as proposed by Vanhoozer, does promote embodiment, but that embodiment is of a text as well as of the ongoing theo-drama. Though Vanhoozer's embodiment is very appropriate for oral cultures, in its current form it is undergirded by unfettered access to the biblical text as well as access to centuries of hermeneutical wisdom in text form. Readers of Vanhoozer have the freedom to choose an embodied approach which eschews the abstractions and propositions of modernist theology. They continue to have the safety net of a library of commentaries and biblical helps at their disposal. They have books by theologians such as Vanhoozer who encourage them to embody the theo-drama. This is a textual privilege not available to many oral cultures. The greatest challenge for oral theologians wishing to embody the biblical theo-drama faithfully will not come from conservative, modernist theologians. The greatest challenge will simply be access. An oral theology utilizing Vanhoozer's theatrical model as its framework will have to adjust the model or ensure oral-aural access to the text and other helps.

2.7.3   Oral Theology as Participation

Oral theology is dialogical. Oral theodramatic theology invites relationship, not only with the story, but with the author and protagonist of that story as well as the other participants in the story. The dialogue inherent in the story not only embodies the story, but also

requires action. This moves oral theology from story theology (Koehler 2010:221–2) or character theology (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:164) towards theo-dramatic theology.

'The intellectual nature of a story is exhausted with its text, but the functional, cultural, and pragmatic aspect of any native tale is manifested as much in its enactment, embodiment, and contextual relations as in the text.' (Malinowski 1984:199)

The church in oral cultures bears the same responsibility of embodying the theo-drama. It is to faithfully participate in the theo-drama in such a way that the gospel is understood and accepted by the world around it. In oral cultures, reality is constructed and understood through embodiment and discourse in the real world (Östman 2005:76–7). Weber (1957) wrote about sharing the gospel among non-literate peoples of Indonesia. He was particularly concerned about the biblical foundations of using an oral approach to proclamation. He posits that biblical gospel proclamation is dialogical, thus dramatic, in nature, writing 'those addressed are taken into the great drama of redemptive history. This dialogic and dramatic character of divine speaking not only justifies but demands the dialogic and dramatic way of proclamation' (1957:64). Oral dialogue requires active participation.

Participation is characteristic of oral societies. Lévy-Bruhl challenged the anthropological understanding of his time in which oral cultures were seen to be primitive and incapable of abstract thought. Lévy-Bruhl was the first to describe oral *mentalités* or 'modes of thought' — conceptual categorizations that were not an inferior or an underdeveloped form of thinking. Instead, he described these *mentalités* as being highly developed and complex within their own conceptual framework (Lévy-Bruhl 1975:33).

Lévy-Bruhl describes the primary orientation of an oral *mentalité* as *participatory*. Oral participation, according to Lévy-Bruhl, is the relationship and interaction with the real world, and can be experiential identification with the essence of a person or thing (1985b:108–9). The oral *mentalité*, then, relates more closely with the *mathesis* of the Radical Orthodoxy programme (Milbank et al. 1999:3) than it does with Vanhoozer's

understanding of participation. Oral cultures tend to participate in the world around them, not only in the sense of taking part in the unfolding action of that world, but also partaking in the essence of that world (Lévi-Strauss 1991).

At the same time, an oral *mentalité* which demands participation and identification in the real world would respond to Vanhoozer's call for the church to participate in the theo-drama.

> 'The church is to go out into the world to enact parables of God's kingdom, loving the world with an extraordinary outpouring of its own life as Christ poured out his own life for the church…In sum: the church exists to be a living exhibit of the reality of the gospel.' (Vanhoozer 2014:233)

2.7.4 Oral Theology in Community

An oral theo-dramatic theology invites audience participation; it also invites participation of the church. Orality is necessarily an intersubjective enterprise (Knighton 2006:138). Theologizing is not a matter of transactional teaching. Rather it is a matter of theology in living enactment in which all are active participants carrying forward the story line of the theo-drama in dialogical action. The community engages in interpretation and meaning-making together (Rynkiewich 2007:50–1). In oral cultures, this intersubjectivity is informed by the *habitus* of the society (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:126).

> The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus. (Bourdieu 2010:78)

Vanhoozer advocates for the formation of a Christian *habitus.* However, Vanhoozer's conception of *habitus* is more intentional than the traditional sociological understanding of the term. For him, *habitus* comes from the ongoing fitting participation in the theo-drama of God's communicative action, to participate in the mind of Christ (Vanhoozer 2005:255–6). An oral theodramatic theology in Vanhoozer's model would resist the temptation of local narrative theologies to reflect the *habitus* of the local culture without embodying the theodramatic discourse as revealed through Scripture. Oral theodramatic

participation engages not only the culture of the actors and the audience but also the very mind of the divine playwright.

Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic theology is oral in that it promotes participation and action, in community. This action often takes the form of discourse on the part of the players through evangelism, edification, and worship. Belonging and community are of utmost importance to oral cultures (Prior 2019:4). Belonging, in the sense of participating in God's theo-drama as well as the communion between the Father, Son, and Spirit, aligns with the communal nature of oral cultures.[16] This focus on relationship in community in Vanhoozer's model provides a potential argument for moving from a narrative understanding of oral theology to a theodramatic understanding of oral theology.

2.8   Conclusion

This chapter began by describing narrative theology and the role it has played in oral theologizing. King Atchiba's embodied use of the biblical narrative, in community, portrayed an example of oral theology. The next section then described the gaps in both epic and lyric narrative theologizing, and proposed a turn towards drama as a method of theologizing that encompasses and moves beyond narrative. Specifically, it described Vanhoozer's theodramatics, which is grounded in relationship, embodiment, participation, and community and generated and governed by the subject matter of theology itself, the triune God in communicative action (Vanhoozer 2020). Finally, this chapter described how the theo-dramatic framework shows potential as a framework for oral theologizing because of its connections with key characteristics of orality. These key aspects, narrative, embodiment, and community not only map onto Vanhoozer's model,

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[16] Again, in some oral cultures, this belonging may lean more towards the ontological participation from which Vanhoozer distances. See (Lévi-Strauss 1991).

but they also provide fertile ground for exploring how Vanhoozer's model might be utilized in non-Western contexts.

Vanhoozer's framework is not without its potential flaws regarding oral theologizing. There is a practical need for access to Scripture in oral cultures. Beyond the need for access, there will always be potential for disagreement between Vanhoozer's framework and local oral theologies. The critical question remains, 'Who has authority in oral theologizing?' This question will be explored and addressed in subsequent chapters of this thesis. The next chapter will introduce the role of Scripture as magisterial authority in oral theology.

Chapter 3: The Canon as God's Communicative Act

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the place of Scripture in oral theology. The previous chapter explored the role of orality in theologizing, describing narrative approaches to theology and proposing a turn to a theodramatic approach to oral theology. This chapter turns its attention to the role of Scripture in oral theology and orality in regards to Scripture itself.

As with each chapter, it will begin with a vignette from my experience among oral learners. In this case, Abdullah's story illustrates the power of an oral approach to learning and interpreting Scripture in oral theologizing. The following section will explore how orality scholars have approached Scripture. The next section will explore Vanhoozer's approach to Scripture in his theatrical model. Finally, I will assess to what extent Vanhoozer's theatrical model might form a framework for an approach to Scripture in oral theologizing.

3.2 Abdullah's Story: A Vignette

After our experience working on oral storytelling in Bassila, I began to train other missionaries and pastors how to choose and craft stories from the Bible. As I did so, I met many gifted oral theologians. One was named Abdullah. Abdullah was a shop owner in a small Muslim village in Ethiopia.[17] At the age of 42, he had never lived outside of his village. He had no formal education. As a part of running his business, Abdullah had a rudimentary understanding of accounting and enough reading skills to fill out basic forms,

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[17] Identifiers such as the name of the village and the language Abdullah speaks have been withheld for Abdullah's ongoing personal security and the security of those with whom he works.

but he could not read a paragraph of text with significant comprehension. If he needed to understand a document, he employed local school children to read it aloud to him.

Abdullah was a leader in his village. In cases of dispute, he was a well-known peacemaker in the community. Before he became a Christian, Abdullah prayed five times a day without fail. The local imam considered Abdullah to be his most devout follower. He was a wise counsellor to the village king, and he was often asked to represent the village in matters involving neighbouring villages. It was on one of these trips that Abdullah's life was changed.

Several village leaders gathered in the largest town in their area to discuss issues concerning water rights. Abdullah was asked to go to represent his village. One day, Abdullah was drinking coffee at a street side cafe when an American missionary passing through the town came up to him to ask directions. Abdullah spoke the national language, Amharic, and was interested in why the American, who spoke the local language, was coming through his town, so he invited the missionary to coffee. The missionary shared a presentation of the Gospel with Abdullah. He explained that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of all humans and that he was raised from the dead so that all people everywhere can believe in Jesus and go to heaven. The missionary left Abdullah with an audio version of the Bible in the national language as well as his phone number. Abdullah was intrigued by Jesus, so he eagerly took the memory card that contained the audio and promised to call the missionary if he had any more questions.

Abdullah returned to his home and secretly listened to the Gospel of Matthew on his phone. He called the missionary one day and told the missionary that he wanted to become a follower of Jesus. The missionary led Abdullah in repeating a prayer of repentance and belief in Jesus. Over the following seven weeks, Abdullah called the missionary and went through a discipleship program called the Seven Commands of Christ, a discipleship programme developed in the United States emphasizing obedience

to seven commands taught by Jesus in the Gospels. The missionary taught Abdullah each of the seven lessons: (1) Repent and Believe, (2) Be Baptised, (3) Pray, (4) Go… Make Disciples, (5) Love, (6) Lord's Supper, and (7) Give (DuPlessie 2011). Each lesson included verses from Scripture and teaching points. The missionary encouraged Abdullah to share the good news of the gospel with his family and friends and disciple them using the Seven Commands. Abdullah shared with everyone he knew. He told others that if they followed Jesus, they would go to heaven. Many of Abdullah's friends and family decided to follow Jesus, so he started a church in his home. He then shared in other villages and many more people decided to follow Jesus. Abdullah became the pastor of the church in his village, and he became a leader of many pastors in surrounding villages. If people had questions, they went to Abdullah. Often, Abdullah would have to call his missionary friend to find the answers.

The missionary noticed that Abdullah and his congregants did not go to the Bible for the answers to their questions. Although the Bible was available to them in audio format, that audio was still a text being read aloud. The church taught the Seven Commands lessons repeated in seven-week cycles. The local pastors did not seem to progress in their own discipleship, let alone in discipling members of their congregations. The missionary asked if I could come help Abdullah and his team of local pastors develop Bible stories in their own language so that the people group might have access to Scripture for themselves. That is how I met Abdullah and five of the key leaders in his church network (Stringer 2014).

Over a series of five two-week workshops, I worked with Abdullah and his team so that they could access and interpret Scripture for themselves. We used a process, called Storying Together, that is an oral-hermeneutical process designed to help people develop Bible stories in their local language in a way that equips them to access and interpret the whole of Scripture on their own. In the process, a team learns a story crafting process that

moves them from merely listening to audio versions of Scripture to engaging with the meaning of the audio in a way that allows them to share Scripture with others in their own language and storytelling style. The story crafting team begins by telling stories from their own culture that are thematically related to the biblical stories in order to discover the local worldview, storytelling style, and ways of expressing meaning within similar semantic domains. The crafters then visualise the story in as many ways as the team is comfortable using. The teams always dramatize the story, but they may also draw the story or dance it. The team performs each story as they dramatize it, choosing different roles for different team members to act it out. The actors use gestures and movement to describe the story's setting, spacing, emotion, and action. A team performing the story of Jesus calming the storm, for example, will often use props to outline the boat. They will assign different team members to act as disciples and a team member to act as Jesus. They may have other team members narrating the story or acting as the wind and waves. The actors might portray the disciples' terror during the storm by violently shaking the actor playing the sleeping Jesus awake and inflecting their voices with fear. The actor playing Jesus might demonstrate Jesus's authority by raising his hands or speaking sternly. When the teams dramatize the story, they are required not only to visualise the setting, general plot, and scene structure of the story, but also to interpret the story's emotions, movement, and spacing. They put their bodies into the story in order to experience the story from within.

I helped create the Storying Together process with other, Western, missionaries. Over the years, Storying Together evolved, and a Storying Together training is just as likely to be run by a missionary or facilitator from the global south as a Western missionary. But while Storying Together sought to give local communities access to scripture in a way those communities could understand and empower those communities to make decisions, it was imperfect. The exegetical resources needed to make decisions

on interpretative features of biblical stories were often only accessible by an outsider running the training, and a facilitator may have undue influence on the stories a group chose to craft. While the Storying Together process has enabled oral people to access Scripture and share with others, there is still a need for oral exegetical materials to which oral theologians have continuous access.

Despite the imperfections of the process, Abdullah and his team were keen learners. They loved not only learning more about the Bible but also learning how to understand the Bible. They were particularly interested in learning stories from the Old Testament. Those stories resonated with their own culture. The stories also filled in some significant gaps in their understanding of the nature of God, sin, and God's plan of redemption. They had been learning the Seven Commands, which are centred on the New Testament, but as they began to understand the Old Testament, they realised they had gaps in their understanding of how Jesus fulfilled God's plan from the beginning of time. The team learned to interpret Scripture in light of other stories they learned from the canon.

One of the gaps in their understanding was exposed during the process of crafting the story of Pentecost and Peter's sermon from Acts 2. The team began preparing the dramatization of the story, but they kept stopping and engaging in heated debate in their local language. They finally came to me and asked for my help. They were getting stuck with understanding a portion of Peter's sermon:

> God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this. Now he is exalted to the place of highest honour in heaven, at God's right hand. And the Father, as he had promised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today. (Acts 2:32-33 NLT)

The group had a strong disagreement about how to position the characters in the dramatization. Two pastors believed that the actors playing Jesus and God should be next to one another, as the passage seemed to indicate. The rest of the group simply could not agree with that. They had only recently crafted the story of the thief on the cross. They referenced that story as proof that Jesus could not possibly have been next to God, as

Jesus clearly tells one of the thieves that they would be together that day in paradise (Luke 23:43). They asked me how the Bible could say that Jesus was with God and in Heaven at the same time. I asked that group if they would dramatize Peter's sermon for me the way they assumed it must have happened. In the staging of the dramatization, the actors playing Jesus and God were clearly separated. I then asked them to show me where the thief would have been with Jesus in Heaven. They placed an actor representing the thief alongside Jesus, but God was placed far away. Eventually, we discovered together that their conception of Heaven had been strongly influenced by their former worldview in which people are brought to a place of paradise, but God is not present. We discussed the implications of Acts 2:33 for their understanding of the gospel and the discipleship of their congregations. Abdullah and his leaders had been teaching an incomplete view of Heaven to a network of 700 churches with over 54,000 believers. They only discovered the incompleteness of their teaching through learning the canon of Scripture through stories and interpreting the canon through performance. Abdullah and his team of leaders committed to learning as many stories as possible and teaching them to all their pastors and congregations. Many of Abdullah's Sunday sermons now begin with the congregation dramatizing the story.

Abdullah and his team crafted 70 stories from the creation of the world to the return of Jesus. The pastors in his network used these stories in evangelism and discipleship in their areas. As a result, the churches grew in number and strength. But a wave of persecution swept through Abdullah's area. A number of churches were destroyed, and many pastors were put in jail, including Abdullah. The local religious leaders accused Abdullah of disturbing the peace. Abdullah spent two weeks in prison before he was brought to trial. On the day of his trial, he listened silently as people levelled false accusations at him. When he was asked to account for his actions, he began telling Bible stories. He told his audience how God created the world and humankind's sin distorted

the world, human relationships with God, and human relationships with one another. For two hours Abdullah told as many of the stories of the Bible as he knew, telling a panorama of stories that started at creation and ended with the eventual return of Jesus, at which time there will be no more suffering or pain. He looked at his accusers and said, 'You know me. I live in peace with you. I am not your problem. Your problem is your sin. God sent Jesus to deal with your sin.' The authorities released Abdullah from jail. As of today, several of his accusers have now become followers of Jesus (Abdullah 2014). Abdullah used the skills he learned in telling the stories of the biblical canon and interpreting the canon not only as a way of educating his accusers and judge, but also as a way of allowing the full weight of the whole story of the canon to impact the hearts and minds of his audience. Abdullah, a functionally illiterate shopkeeper, is a gifted theologian in that he faithfully understood and proclaimed the truth of God's Word. That proclamation, or performance resulted in understanding on the part of Abdullah's accusers to the point that resulted in their own spiritual conversion and transformation.

3.3   Orality and Scripture

Abdullah's story represents an oral theological approach to Scripture. Oral approaches to accessing and interpreting Scripture have been a primary concern for missionaries and theologians concerned with oral theologizing (Kelber 1983; Yoakum 2014; Klem 1981). Orality studies have matured over the past century.[18] With it, theologians and biblical scholars have evolved their approach to orality and Scripture. In order to understand the role of Scripture in oral theology, this section first explores different perspectives on the role orality played in Scripture formation. It proposes that taking an oral-performative

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[18] Chapter One: Introduction presents an overview of the field of orality studies as a part of the literature review.

perspective on Scripture most accurately describes that role and connects such a perspective to oral theologizing.

3.3.1 Three Perspectives on the Orality of Scripture

Laurens de Vries, a translation advisor with United Bible Societies, describes the evolution of the views on orality in Scripture in relation to Bible translation (de Vries 2017). He articulates three views of orality that have had an impact on Bible translation: the oral-aural, anthropological-linguistic, and oral-written. These three perspectives also have a significant impact on the way in which orality scholarship views Scripture. This in turn guides ways in which Scripture is used in oral theologizing.

3.3.1.1 The Oral-Aural Dimension of Scripture

The first perspective posits that there is an inherent oral-aural dimension to Scripture. The oral-aural dimension relates to the aspects of Scripture which were meant to be spoken and heard. De Vries attributes the origin of this first perspective to Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (Buber and Rosenzweig 1997 as cited in de Vries 2017:18–21). Buber and Rosenzweig were Hebrew theologians during the interbellum period in Germany. Their premise was that the Hebrew Scripture was a written relic of oral literature (Fox 1995:x). Hebrew Scripture consisted of oral traditions that had been written down; therefore, the oral-aural dimension must be accounted for in biblical interpretation. For Buber and Rosenzweig, Scripture was the unified voice of God. The repetition and key words found throughout Hebrew Scripture were indicators of the unity of Scripture. If one were to examine the inherent 'spoken-ness' of the Hebrew Scripture, one might be able to ascertain what the unified 'voice' was saying (Kepnes 1992:44–45). Buber posited that a true translation of the meaning of Scripture must necessarily include its linguistic form in Hebrew. He believed that the form of Scripture was based on its oral-aural dimension. Therefore, Buber's translation divided Scripture into breath-units so that the

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translation might be more accurately voiced and thus a more accurate translation might be achieved.

Other translators and scholars have addressed the need to consider the oral-aural dimension in Scripture. Bible translator and Old Testament scholar Ernst Wendland has advocated for translating the inherent orality of the Hebrew Scripture, particularly as it pertains to Hebrew poetry (Maxey and Wendland 2012; Wendland 2002). In other words, he posits that a correct translation uncovers the oral-aural aspects of the Hebrew. For Wendland and Maxey, this is done through discourse analysis in which they examine the aspects of repetition and vocalization. Word play and figures of speech such as alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia are frequent markers of oral discourse. Sayings, epithets, and graphic imagery are also often key components of Scripture established for the ears rather than the eyes. Wendland works through an analysis of such oral components in Isaiah 66:1-6 in his *Orality and the Scriptures: Composition, Translation, and Transmission* (Wendland 2013:135–7). He illustrates that the form of the Hebrew text is intended to be heard. As such, a correct interpretation of the text would require understanding its oral-aural dimension in order to fully appreciate and better understand the poetic and literary qualities of Scripture. In uncovering or rediscovering the use of the ear in the interpretation of Scripture, the voice of God may be heard (Ong 1967:15–6).

3.3.1.2   The Anthropological-Linguistic Dimension of Scripture

The second of de Vries' perspectives on orality and Scripture focuses on the anthropological-linguistic aspect of Scripture. Proponents of this perspective tend to focus on the orality of the original audience of Scripture rather than the sound dimensions of Scripture in the oral-aural perspective.

> The second perspective on orality has its roots in three academic disciplines (linguistics, anthropology and classical philology) in Europe and America. It lacks the strong connections with theology and philosophy of Buber's construction of orality and for a while the second perspective seemed to express an academic consensus on the nature of orality. The well-written and influential book *Orality and*

Literacy by Ong (1982) summarized this consensus just before it would be shattered by new findings in linguistics, biblical scholarship and anthropology. Precisely because of its less obvious connections with theology and ideology and its strong links to academic disciplines such as linguistics, the second perspective had a far wider impact than the first (de Vries 2017:21).

De Vries exhibits an obvious bias against the second perspective. He particularly accuses Ong of exacerbating the infamous 'Great Divide' between oral and literate cultures (de Vries 2017:22). The Great Divide theory posits that oral and literate communities are incommensurate with one another in communication and cognition to such a point that there exists a great chasm between the two. De Vries is joined by many in decrying the Great Divide (Carr 2005; Evans 2017). He accuses proponents of the Toronto School of espousing and propagating the theory with little evidence to the contrary.[19] De Vries makes sweeping statements about the inadequacy of the second perspective. Unfortunately, de Vries tends to cite his own work within one ethnolinguistic people group as proof that the approach of the second perspective has been 'shattered' (de Vries 2017:24–5).

The majority of orality missiologists and orality scholars espoused the second perspective during the Orality Movement of the late 20th century which 'came of age' in the first decade of the 21st century (Steffen 2014). Linguists from the second perspective described oral communication as highly paratactic, simple syntax with much repetition and formulaic utterances. The structure of oral syntax focuses on rhythm, narrative action, and mnemonic devices. Anthropologists from the second perspective tend to focus on the cognitive dimension of orality by examining differences between oral and literate cultures. Oral cognition focuses on concrete, relational, and experiential modes of cognition (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:116–26).

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[19] The so-called Toronto School (Havelock 1986; Innis 1951; McLuhan 1962; Ong 2012) has often been accused of advocating for the Great Divide theory, although all of them eventually denied truly espousing such a theory.

As mentioned above, the most cited work on the cognitive characteristics of oral people is Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (Ong 2012). Perhaps Ong's most penetrating influence on orality studies was his chapter on the 'psychodynamics' of orality. He describes the cognitive milieu of oral people as additive rather than subordinative; aggregative rather than analytic; redundant or 'copious'; conservative or traditionalist; close to human lifeworld; agonistically toned; empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced; homeostatic; and situational rather than abstract (Ong 2012:31–75). Ong's psychodynamics has had broad influence upon orality scholarship. Missiologists proposed new evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and theological education strategies based on scholarship from this so-called second perspective (Chiang et al. 2010; International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2005b). As orality scholars contemplated the impact of orality on the study of Scripture, they explored how an oral cognitive milieu in the original audience of Scripture might impact their, and consequently our, interpretation of Scripture.

As such, the focus of this second perspective is on the orality of the original audience of Scripture. Scholars such as Harris, Gerhardsson, and Kelber have argued that the fundamental orality of Ancient Palestinian and Roman worlds necessitates an oral perspective of Scripture (Gerhardsson et al. 1998; Harris 1989; Kelber 1983). If the author was writing for an oral audience, then they would have used oral rather than written conventions for expression and memory. This fuller understanding of the audience results in a fuller understanding of the meaning of the text. Harris estimates that less than ten percent of men and well under five percent of women in the Roman world were literate (Harris 1989:329–30). Most of what we know as Scripture would have existed as oral traditions long before they were written. The writing down of the oral tradition served as a memory device rather than a substitute for the oral. This means that the Bible would have been meant for oral people who tended toward the concrete, experiential, and

relational cognition described by Ong and other supposed Great Divide theorists. From this perspective, if the Bible were intended for an original oral audience, then it should be interpreted, translated, and transmitted in an oral manner for contemporary oral audiences. De Vries, however, rejects such a sweeping conclusion regarding orality and the Bible. He prefers a third perspective focused on an intermingling between the oral and the written.

3.3.1.3   Local Oral-Written Interfaces

The third perspective described by de Vries highlights the dynamic interplay between orality and textuality. De Vries prefers this approach as a more mature way of thinking about orality and Scripture (de Vries 2017:25). Anthropologists and orality scholars no longer think of orality in terms of universal characteristics that are diametrically opposed to textuality. In this perspective on orality and Scripture, the Bible is no longer a textual residue of oral tradition. While parallelism, parataxis, inclusion, and chiasm were structures previously seen as indicators that the Bible was originally oral in form, de Vries posits that such structures should be considered writing strategies that facilitate memorisation (de Vries 2017:27). For this perspective, de Vries relies heavily upon Carr's *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart* (Carr 2005).

Carr examines the orality of Ancient Near East, particularly first century Palestine. For Carr the communicative milieu was a mixture of oral and print culture. Instead of a continuum between oral and text communication with orality being at one pole and textuality being at the other, there was a dynamic interplay between the oral and textual forms of communication (Carr 2005:6). Text and literacy were well established during this period. However, ancient education was intended to move understanding and learning to the hearts of the learners, and textuality took a supporting role for this learning. People often used a text as a support for oral performance in much the same way that a

musical score might be used as a support for a musician who already knows a musical piece (Carr 2005:4).

De Vries follows the example of Carr, who explored the historical situatedness of the Hebrew Bible and its use of scrolls, memorization, and recitation in ancient Israel as compared to the historical context of oral-written interfaces in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece (de Vries 2017:29). De Vries ends his section on the third perspective with an appeal to more research into the oral-written interface in Ancient Israel, particularly as it pertains to performance of the Scripture. In this, de Vries comes very close to finding what may be a healthy fourth perspective which operates as a more fully realized version of his third perspective better incorporating all three perspectives: an oral-performative perspective of Scripture.

3.3.2 A Proposed Fourth Perspective: Oral-Performative Perspective of Scripture

If the third perspective might be seen as an intermingling of the oral and written dynamics of the Bible, the fourth perspective, hinted at but not fully realized by de Vries, might provide a perspective that encompasses the oral-aural aspects of Scripture, the orality of the original audience, as well as an understanding of the interplay between the oral and written in specific situations and historical contexts. This fourth perspective does so by recognising the performative nature of Scripture, and thus might be called an oral-performative perspective of Scripture. This oral-performative nature of Scripture may provide insights into the orality of Scripture and its place in oral theologizing. Scripture as performance focuses not only on the oral-aural dimension of Scripture, but also on the audience within a communicative event and a particular context. The following section will describe current scholarship on performative aspects of Scripture in order to move towards this fourth perspective.

3.3.2.1 From Oral Biblical Criticism to Biblical Performance Criticism

Biblical critic Casey Wayne Davis developed what he called 'oral biblical criticism'. He developed his process using discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism to study the book of Philippians. For Davis, understanding the oral nature of the communication event of the letter as well as the oral rhetorical structure of the letter is crucial to the understanding of the message of Philippians.

> The characteristics of primary oral compositions are highly relevant to New Testament literature. It was primarily composed orally as the author dictated to an amanuensis but, even more significantly, it was composed for the ears of the audience (Davis 1999:62)

Scripture was and is a communicative act. Scripture is God's communicative act to humankind. The written Scripture is God's discourse to humanity today. At the same time, it is the written record of God communicating through human authors to human audiences. In many cases, the original communicative event to which Scripture is a written record was originally oral. Therefore, the oral milieu of the act itself, the orality of the original audience, and the oral-aural dimensions of the textual record demand attention.

Davis' oral biblical criticism has been expanded by scholars advocating for a biblical performance criticism. David Rhoads is a key voice in biblical performance criticism. He suggests that taking seriously the oral-aural medium through which the early church would have experienced the writings and tradition of the New Testament means understanding the people, places, and circumstances of the performance events of Scripture (Rhoads 2006b:180). In Rhoads' model, all of the aspects of the biblical performance event must be taken into consideration (Iverson 2009:95). Rhoads suggests that a methodology for interpreting Scripture based on performance would involve multiple methods for interpretation, including orality criticism, social-science criticism, speech-act theory, linguistic criticism, translation studies, ideological criticism, and theatre studies (Rhoads 2006b:168–72). Thus, Rhoads suggests biblical interpretation not only requires uncovering the original performance of the text, but also that performance of the biblical text itself is a useful method for interpreting Scripture. The text gives stage direction for its performance, invites connection, and requires the interpreter to understand Scripture as a speech-act. Proponents of biblical performance criticism have grown in the past ten years (Hearon et al. 2009; Dewey 2013; Shiner 2003; Boomershine 1988; Maxey 2009; Botha 2012; Loubser 2013; Weissenrieder and Coote 2015).

3.3.2.2 Performing Text in the Ancient World

Robert Miller explores the oral process of authorship of the Old Testament as he investigates the appropriateness of Parry and Lord's oral-formulaic theory of composition.[20] Ultimately, Miller rejects the oral-formulaic theory, but he uses cultural analogues to examine the performance of the Old Testament narratives. By comparing the Old Testament text with Homeric, Icelandic, and Ancient Arabic poetry, Miller underscores the importance of considering the setting of the performance itself when interpreting the Old Testament. For Miller, the performance of Old Testament narratives were most often in a court setting performed by semi-professional bards (Miller 2011:113).

Achtemeier and others (Achtemeier 1990; Hearon et al. 2009; Keith 2014; Harris 1989) highlight the function and practice of reading in the Ancient world. The act of reading was, in itself, most often an oral performance. Oral reading of a text was the norm (Graham 2001:32). This oral reading was more akin to a performance than the modern audience would consider public reading. The text would have been performed by professionals or scribal elites who had recited and rehearsed the text beforehand. The text itself would operate as a mnemonic device — as mentioned above, the text operated in much the same way a musical score does for a musician who performs a piece she has practiced and memorised. Scribes operated much more as performers than as copyists. Scribes did not transcribe in a manner that facilitated a mere public reading of the text, but rather transcribed texts that were meant to be performed. Otherwise, there would be more spacing and diacritical markings in such texts. Existing examples of ancient scribal texts have little to none of these elements; these texts had lines without spacing between

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[20] The oral-formulaic theory is discussed in chapter one of this thesis as a part of the literature review. Parry and Lord developed this theory while examining the potentiality of the oral composition of Homeric literature by studying Slavic oral poets, particularly the Muslim oral poets of Hertzegovina. They identified formulas and themes that allowed these poets to compose and perform orally epics that took hours and days to tell.

words. The text was not used as an instrument for reading. It was an *aide-memoire*, notes that supported the public delivery of a memorized text (Kirk 2008:218–20). Wendland suggests a more developed understanding of the wide variety of scribal practices. The scribe did play a key role in the development of the texts, but he affirms the performative nature of this scribal activity (Wendland 2013:82–4). The text was meant to be orally performed.

3.3.2.3 <u>Performing Scripture</u>

Biblical scholars have examined ways in which Scripture, as an ancient text, was meant to be performed. A number of scholars have explored the performative nature of the Gospel of Mark (Horsley et al. 2006; Dewey 2013; Shiner 2003; Kelber 1983). The Gospel of Mark was originally an oral performance before it was committed to text and became Scripture. Nonetheless, it was still considered an authoritative account of the life of Jesus. Horsley describes the performance of the Gospel in terms of the 'cultural memory' of the early church. The social and cultural milieu played a key role in the performance of the Gospel. The performance of the story was the anti-hegemonic story of the early Christian church set upon the backdrop of religious and political persecution (Horsley et al. 2006:chapter 10). The Gospel serves to create a social identity for the new people of God in the face of opposition from the cultural hegemony of the Jewish elite and Roman dominance. The audience is called to appropriate a new story, a new Israel, and a new identity as the people of God.

> For those who formulated, performed, and heard Mark's narrative, Jesus' actions and teachings were understandable as episodes in a longer story of the renewal of Israel led by a figure whose mission was reminiscent, and fit the pattern, of the prototypes Moses and Elijah in popular Israelite cultural memory (Horsley et al. 2006:loc. 2591-2593).

While Horsley emphasized the sociocultural milieu of the performance of Mark, Shiner focused on the performance itself. As a communicative event, the performance would have been delivered by someone who embodied the narrative of Mark in order to elicit an emotional response from the audience (Shiner 2003:191–2). The audience played a

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key role in the performance, often participating in the performance by joining the telling itself (2003:153) or by identifying with the characters (Dewey 2013:102). As seen in chapter two, this performative discourse between author and audience is a critical component of oral communication.

One might conclude that the oral-performative perspective is appropriate only for narrative genres of Scripture. However, the oral-performative perspective finds particular relevance in the poetic and prophetic genres of Scripture, and some scholars also see the oral-performative nature in epistolary genres:

> Paul's letter was not written by him as an individual, sitting at a desk and dropping a note to some friends. We must become aware of a much more complex event: some persons combined their efforts to deliberate and "perform" a letter; there was someone involved in the creation and transportation of it finally "recreating" for others a presentation/performance of the "message" intended for sharing (Botha 2012:loc. 5436).

Paul's letters were likely composed by a team of authors which included the person or persons intended to deliver the letter. The emissary, not the letter itself, represented Paul (Loubser 2013:118). Paul would have coached the letter performer on the correct intonation, pacing, and emphases of the letter (Botha 2012:loc. 5557). Thus, it was the *performance* of the letter that carried the full apostolic weight of Paul.

3.3.2.4 Towards an Oral-Performative Perspective

Therefore, a fourth, oral-performative perspective on orality in Scripture captures and encompasses the oral-aural dimension of the first perspective, the oral audience focus of the second anthropological-linguistic perspective, and the interplay between orality and textuality of the third local oral-written perspective. In short, the oral-performative perspective describes Scripture as the written record of these oral performances that was itself performed and was culturally informed, historically situated, and orally delivered. This written record was also a kind of script that called for further improvised performance.

3.3.3   Orality of Scripture in Theologizing

The orality of Scripture demands the attention of theologians who take Scripture as the ultimate authority for doctrine and right living. The consistent textual bias of traditional interpretations of Scripture exposes the difficulty of imagining the oral composition and transmission of a canon of which only written artifacts remain. Though biblical scholars have relied upon orality scholarship from the turn of the 20th century for their understanding of the oral nature of the text of the Bible, theologians from oral cultures theologizing from an oral perspective may give the world of biblical criticism new life, or at least a new perspective on Scripture (Dunn 2005:92).

Abdullah is one of these oral theologians. He performed a selection of biblical narratives from the canon as his response to his accusers, telling a biblical story in the storytelling style of his oral community and inviting his audience to participate in the telling. Abdullah carefully selected the stories he told in order to share a gospel message while simultaneously inviting his audience to participate in that message. Abdullah not only performed the stories of Scripture as a gifted storyteller in his culture, but also as a member of society who had the right to share truth for the good of the community. Thus, he also called upon the social memory of his audience in order to invite them to engage with the theological truths of the story. Abdullah is identified as a trusted member of society who had a right to share such truths for the good of his community. In the communicative event described in the vignette, Abdullah, as an oral theologian, used his performance for three purposes: to utilize Scripture to clearly communicate the biblical metanarrative of the canon, which he had learned through audio recordings of its text and stories; to develop his audience's understanding of the nature of God and the nature of sin; and to call for his audience to respond to this new understanding through repentance. Abdullah used a canonical approach to Scripture in much the same manner used in Vanhoozer's theatrical model, which I will expound upon next.

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3.4 Scripture and Vanhoozer's Theatrical Model

Did Abdullah, the functionally illiterate shop owner, engage with a theological interpretation of Scripture?[21] The following section will answer that question by exploring the use of Scripture in Vanhoozer's theodramatic model for theology.

3.4.1 Canonical-Linguistic Theology and Scripture

The subtitle of Vanhoozer's magnum opus, *The Drama of Doctrine*, is 'A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology'. Canonical-linguistic theology emphasizes wisdom, canonical practice, and the retrieval of the principle of *sola scriptura* (Vanhoozer 2005:16). In retrieving the principle of *sola scriptura,* Vanhoozer does not suggest that all theologizing should be located in Scripture alone. Rather, Vanhoozer's Scripture principle places Scripture above all other sources of theologizing. In canonical-linguistic theology, the locus of supreme authority is Christian Scripture:

> Canonical-linguistic theology attends both to the drama *in* the text – what God is doing in the world through Christ – and to the drama that continues in the church as God uses Scripture to address, edify, and confront its readers (Vanhoozer 2005:17).

Vanhoozer assumes Scripture as the fiduciary framework for theology (2005:100). A 'fiduciary framework' is not simply another term for fideism, in which reason is oriented and guided by sole reliance upon faith or religious belief. Instead, a fiduciary framework is an epistemic commitment to a system of implicit beliefs held in social location, tradition, or interpretative communities that affirms what the knower believes to be knowledge. Vanhoozer borrows this concept from scientific philosopher Michael Polanyi's assertion that a post-critical philosophy must recognize faith (hence fiduciary – from *fiducia*, Latin for 'trust') 'as the source of all knowledge' and that 'no intelligence,

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[21] A person who is functionally illiterate has some level of literacy, but that level is inadequate for performing everyday needs involving literacy. Someone who is functionally illiterate cannot read long sentences of text with comprehension.

however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework' (Polanyi 1998:266). To demonstrate this, Polanyi compares the Azande people, the pre-modern people group famously researched by anthropologist E. Evans-Pritchard, with the modernist scientific community (1998:286–95). Polanyi shows that both groups hold to a set of implicit beliefs that form a fiduciary framework which in turn forms and informs their decision making. Language itself is impossible without a fiduciary framework. Vanhoozer further clarifies, 'To espouse a fiduciary framework is to inhabit a tradition of inquiry and to be apprenticed to its senior practitioners. In particular, to inhabit a fiduciary framework is to indwell a language' (Vanhoozer 2016:100). In canonical-linguistic theology, Scripture is the fiduciary framework.

Taking Christian Scripture as the fiduciary framework, canonical-linguistic theology places God as the author of all canonical Scripture. Scripture then becomes a divine discourse in which the triune God speaks to people (Wolterstorff 1995). Canonical-linguistic theology views this divine discourse as God's speech-acts.[22] In the triune economy of revelation, God the Father reveals himself to Israel through the prophets, the Son reveals the Father through the incarnation, and the Spirit speaks through human agents to effect God's divine illocutions (Vanhoozer 2005:198; 2016:42). The locutionary act is mediated through human agents, but the illocution of the divine discourse constitutes biblical authority:

> In sum: it is the divine illocutions – God's use – that constitute biblical authority. Let us posit the notion of a "canonical illocution" to refer to "what God is doing by means of human discourse in the biblical texts *at the level of the canon*." … the divine author is not merely a teacher who passes on propositional truths or a narrator who conveys the discourse of others but a dramatist who does things in and through the dialogical actions of others. (Vanhoozer 2005:179)

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[22] J.L. Austin defined speech acts as: (1) the locutionary act which is the act of saying something; (2) the illocutionary act which is the act performed in saying something; and (3) the perlocutionary effect which is the effect produced by having said something. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

Biblical interpretation rests upon the initiative of the triune God to reveal himself while effecting the illocutions of the economy (God's ordered plan) of the gospel so that human beings may be included in the divine communication of the triune God (Vanhoozer 2005:42–3).[23]

Wolterstorff contended that in the very act of speaking (discoursing), God is making a claim about his nature and authority to speak, and in promising (covenanting) God takes a stance towards humanity and expects a response (Wolterstorff 1995:82–5). As the speech-acts of God, Scripture is given its authority by its divine author, and thus '…triune self-communication is the overarching framework for theological understanding of God and the gospel' (Vanhoozer 2016:50).

God not only reveals himself, but he asserts, commands, and promises (Thiselton 1992:296). God speaks to people through Scripture to accomplish a certain goal (Wolterstorff 1995:123–5). Similarly, Abdullah spoke Scripture to accomplish the goal of bringing his accusers to an understanding of their own need for salvation in Jesus. He did so by employing a canonical-linguistic approach to using Scripture — for Abdullah, Scripture took centre place in his theologizing, forming a fiduciary framework within which he performed a selected series of stories from the biblical canon intended to reveal God in communicative action and his plan of salvation through the theo-drama revealed in Scripture.

The rest of this section will explore three aspects of Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach in more depth: the canonical use of Scripture; Scripture as script, prescript, and transcript; and Scripture as 'lighting that illuminates the stage'.

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[23] Ibid., 42-43. Vanhoozer goes on to claim, 'In sum, the gospel is ultimately unintelligible apart from Trinitarian theology. Only the doctrine of the Trinity adequately accounts for how those who are not God come to share in the fellowship of Father and Son through the Spirit. The Trinity is both the Christian specification of God and a summary statement of the gospel, in that the possibility of life with God depends on the person and work of the Son and Spirit.

3.4.1.1   Canonical Use of Scripture in Theology

Ultimate authority in canonical-linguistic theology resides in the biblical canon. In this way, the canonical-linguistic approach proposed by Vanhoozer may be seen as a reaction against Georger Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach. Lindbeck described religion as a type of linguistic framework that shapes all of life (Lindbeck 1984:19). Theology provides the grammar for this framework. The criteria for truth claims in cultural-linguistic theology is its internal consistency within the language and schemata of a particular culture; therefore, as long as its truth claims are consistent with the language of that community, those claims are deemed to be true (McGrath 1997:30–4). The locus of authority is thus how a community of faith uses Scripture. Vanhoozer reacts against this in the canonical-linguistic approach by placing authority in the canon of Scripture rather than in communal practices (Vanhoozer 2005:97). It is the canon of Scripture that forms the fiduciary framework of the canonical-linguistic approach to theology.

> The canonical approach advocated here takes the whole of canon as the interpretative framework for understanding God, the world, oneself, and others. A canonical interpretation is one that reads individual passages and book as elements within the divine drama of redemption. Thus, the canonical dialogue – the divers forms of communicative action that comprise Scripture – governs the subsequent speech and action of the church. The canon is nothing less than the authoritative script for those who wish to understand, and participate in, the divine drama (2005:149).

3.4.1.2   Scripture as Script, Prescript, and Transcript

In Vanhoozer's *Drama of Doctrine*, he follows other theo-dramatic theologians (Balthasar 1990) in referring to Scripture as the *script* of the theo-drama (Vanhoozer 2005:22). In *Faith Speaking Understanding*, Vanhoozer credits Vander Lugt for refining his understanding of the place of Scripture in the theatrical model (Vanhoozer 2014:24n25). Vander Lugt proposes that Scripture in the theatrical model should be both transcript and prescript of the theo-drama (Vander Lugt 2014a:97).

As transcript, Scripture is a record of the pre-canonical, canonical, and post-canonical performances of the theo-drama. Vander Lugt helpfully describes this as

transcription of the worlds behind the text, within the text itself, and in front of the text. The pre-canonical transcript of the world behind the text is the testimony of what God has said and done in the theo-drama. The canonical transcript of the world of the text is the record of the authorial content or original performance of the text. The post-canonical transcript is a guide for improvisational performance of the theo-drama in different contexts (Vander Lugt 2014a:95–7).

As prescript, Vander Lugt asserts that Scripture '…includes all the diverse ways Scripture generates and guides further theo-dramatic performances…' (2014a:97). The canon of Scripture provides a paradigm for fitting participation in the theo-drama. When taken as a whole, the canon provides the necessary framework for new improvisatory performances of the theo-drama.

> Because the theo-drama has not ended, Scripture as a whole is a prescript to guide fitting and imaginative performance in the theo-drama in memory of what came before and in anticipation of what is yet to come (2014a:99).

For Vanhoozer, Scripture is not only a record of the divine theo-drama, it is itself a part of the theo-drama in that Scripture is a set of speech-acts in which God not only provides testimony on how he has worked throughout history, but he also instructs, encourages, exhorts, and transforms people through Scripture. So, Scripture is not only a divine saying, but it is also a divine *doing* which is intended to lead us towards living within the framework of the divine theo-drama.

3.4.1.3   Scripture as Lighting that Illuminates the Stage

Though Vanhoozer adopts the metaphors of transcript and prescript in his theatrical model (Vanhoozer 2014:23–4), his preferred metaphor for Scripture in his theatrical model is as 'the lighting that illuminates the stage' (2014:63–4). The Bible is the light of the theo-drama, revealing the truths of God and the manner in which a disciple of God should walk (2014:65). In order to walk in the light, one must walk both in the *sapientia* as well as the *scientia* of Scripture. The *scientia* of Scripture in the canonical-linguistic

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approach refers to discovering the meaning of the text itself, and the *sapientia* of Scripture is the meaning the text has in the lives, the speech and action, of the reader of the text. In a footnote of *Faith Speaking Understanding*, Vanhoozer explains that he describes the ways a theologian should walk in the light of Scripture in part three of his *Drama of Doctrine*:

> These ways constitute the backbone of the canonical-linguistic approach, the heart of which is the suggestion that the norm of Christian theology is a function of the way language is used in the biblical canon rather than ecclesial culture. The relationship between Scripture and church theology is asymmetrical: the wisdom embodied in the canon must govern the church's speech, thinking, and action today rather than vice versa. (Vanhoozer 2014:64n40)

God uses human authors to express his theo-drama, but he is the divine playwright and ultimately the protagonist of the theo-drama which Scripture serves to illuminate and direct. In this sense, Scripture is not only human performance, but it is also a divine performance.

To walk in the light of the *scientia* of Scripture is to speak and act in a way that is fitting to the canon of Scripture. Fittingness, which was also explored in the previous chapter, is not about adhering to a set of principles; it is about living in accordance with the whole of the canon and participating in the theo-drama of Scripture in a way that accords with the emplotted action and direction of Scripture. So, fittingness is a matter of living in a way that the part fits the whole of the canon. In this way, the text is performed. However, fitting performance of the text requires an understanding of the meaning of biblical text, the *scientia* of Scripture.

The canonical-linguistic approach to Scripture resists the temptation to exegete Scripture for the sake of mining propositional nuggets of meaning. Such propositionalism abstracts revealed truth through logic and reason (Vanhoozer 2005:266). The canonical-linguistic approach agrees that Scripture contains many propositions that can and should be understood. The biblical canon, however, cannot be boiled down to a set of propositional statements derived from an intellectual engagement with Scripture. The

canon is a collection of many speech-acts of God through many human authors who reveal not only information about God, but God himself. So, a canonical-linguistic approach to Scripture is a dramatic approach to Scripture that not only contains propositional truth statements, but also contains the divine communicative action of God (2005:277). Walking in the *sapientia* of Scripture is to speak and act fittingly in a particular context of Scripture. The goal of theology is to walk wisely while the light of Scripture directs and guides. Scripture is not a system of abstract thought — rather, it guides the reader in everyday living so that they make right judgements, that lead to right decisions, that ultimately lead to right thought and action. This wisdom, or *phronesis,* works through the Church's improvisatory performance of the theo-drama in different temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts — the Church as performer of theology will be explored further in the next chapter.[24]

Thus, Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic approach to Scripture is performative. Everyone performs: God as divine playwright performs through communicative action; human authors of the text, who often performed the text before it was written; the original audience for the text/performance participated in and reacted to that performance; and the Church, who performs the wisdom found in the biblical canon in order to fittingly participate in the ongoing theo-drama.

3.5   Conclusion

The first section of this chapter told the story of an oral theologian, Abdullah, and his theological use of Scripture. The second section described the various approaches orality scholars have used in interpreting the orality of Scripture. In that section, I introduced a perspective entitled the oral-performative perspective of Scripture. I suggested that this

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[24] Improvisation and performance will be discussed at length in chapter six which explores the place of doctrine and the church in oral theology.

perspective appreciates not only the inherent orality of the biblical text itself, but also takes seriously the orality of the original human authors and audience of the biblical text. The third section of this chapter introduced Vanhoozer's approach to Scripture, which places emphasis on the performance of the triune God in communicative action. This is an ontological approach to Scripture in which the biblical canon is seen as the self-revelation of the Triune God for the purpose of redemption and the creation of a covenant people (Vanhoozer 2014:176).

In his doctoral dissertation, orality scholar Trevor Yoakum suggested that this 'updated Scripture principle' could form a framework for oral theologizing.

> … Vanhoozer's proposal is a creative display of theological imagination that merges ontology (God as communicative action), epistemology (the Bible as God's self-communication), and hermeneutics (by considering Scripture as God's illocutionary acts). (Yoakum 2014:20)

Yoakum views Vanhoozer's approach to Scripture as a corrective for what he believes to be a lack of theological integrity in the strategies associated with the Orality Movement. Members of the Orality Movement generally adhered to the anthropological-linguistic perspective of the orality of Scripture, which focused upon the orality of the original audience and, analogically, the orality of the current-day audience. As a result, their approach to Scripture could be seen as placing too much emphasis on the perceived orality of the current audience and not enough emphasis on a theological engagement with the whole of the biblical canon.

Yoakum latches onto the concept of 'oral Bible' as a primary example. In the end, Yoakum's stated goal of proving Vanhoozer's theo-dramatic approach to Scripture to be an adequate theological framework for orality in ministry[25] was overshadowed by his sustained attack on the use of the term 'oral Bible' in missions. At the time of the writing

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[25] The term 'orality' is oftentimes incorrectly used to describe a tool to be used or a strategy to be implemented. Orality is neither of those things; it is a state of being that is culturally-bound and historically-determined.

of his thesis, the term had largely fallen out of use. A number of early proponents within the Orality Movement, myself being one of them, recognized the term 'oral Bible' to be unhelpful. Proponents of the term often used 'oral Bible' to attempt to give access to the metanarrative of Scripture to oral people through the development of a selection of orally told biblical stories. The term itself was unhelpful in that it suggested that a selection of stories from the Bible could serve as a substitute for the whole of the biblical canon. However, as Vanhoozer would agree, the Bible is a collection of divine speech-acts comprised of many literary genres – narrative, poetry, law, wisdom, epistles, and apocalyptic writings to name a few. An oral-performative approach to Scripture would appreciate the oral performance within all genres of the biblical canon while seeking a theological engagement not only with Scripture, but also with the God's communicative acts which reveal himself and his theo-drama.

Abdullah performed a series of biblical narratives. One might accuse him of ignoring other biblical genres for the sake of his audience or perhaps for the sake of his own memory. Perhaps the biblical storying strategy blinded him to the use of other biblical genres in the moment. But in any case, he theologically engaged with the canon to reveal the God of Scripture and to guide his audience in how they might fittingly participate in God's theo-drama. Abdullah invited his audience to participate in the theo-drama by listening to the canon of Scripture. God communicated himself through Abdullah's performance of the canon. The audience did derive propositional content, but they also moved beyond mere understanding of the *scientia* of Scripture to the *sapientia* of responding in faith. An oral approach to Scripture is not only about hearing the word and speaking the word; it is also about doing the word.

Chapter 4: The Church as Performer and Performance of Theology

4.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter discussed the place of Scripture in oral theologizing, this chapter will focus on the use and interpretation of Scripture by the faith community. The chapter will begin with a vignette describing the role of community in an oral people group and how that community interpreted Scripture. Next, the chapter will discuss the place of community in oral theology with a particular focus on the debate regarding oral hermeneutics and the gap that exists in current approaches. The next section will discuss community in Vanhoozer's theatrical model of theologizing. Finally, I will assess to what extent Vanhoozer's model might form a framework for oral theologizing that takes into account the role of community in oral theologizing.

4.2 Theologizing in Community: A Vignette

The Anii people live in the forests of middle and northern Benin and Togo. Historically, the Anii settled in the forests as they fled the slave trade in southern Benin, Togo, and Ghana. The dense forests provided protection and isolation. One village is named *Bafolangi,* which means 'they sleep on high', because the villagers often strung hammocks in the upper branches of the trees to sleep whenever there was news of marauding groups from the South hunting for slaves to sell to European ships.

For many of the Anii people, this is not ancient history but very recent memory. The Anii language does not have tense markers; it has verbal markers that indicate the level of certainty or historicity of an event. One marker indicates a distant past which may or may not have happened. The other marker indicates something that has happened recently for which one might find an eyewitness. Stories about the slave trade are told as if they happened in the recent past. As a result of their history, the Anii people are

intensely xenophobic as well as extremely interdependent amongst themselves (Stringer and Stringer 2003).

When my wife and I lived and worked among the Anii as linguists and Bible translators, we were accepted because we were under the protection of King Atchiba. We were also introduced and vouched for in the community by the local literacy director, Mr. Gomon. He was the trusted advisor of the king. We were his special wards. Mr. Gomon's wife, Madame Gomon, took special interest in my wife, Tricia. Madame Gomon was the district's women's leader, so Tricia often sat in Madame Gomon's courtyard while groups of women gathered to talk and do business. As I spent years sitting in King Atchiba's home listening and learning, Tricia spent years listening to Madame Gomon as she cared for the women in her community and wisely helped the women navigate conflicts and relationships within the community. Madame Gomon provided wise counsel and fair judgement when issues arose among the women.

After years of sitting, listening, and learning, we began crafting Bible stories in Anii in 2003. We started with 20 Old Testament stories and planned on having another twenty to thirty stories from the New Testament. My wife, our Anii story crafting team, and I selected stories that were designed to give the community an overarching understanding of God, his nature, his plan for salvation, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the church. We planned to develop the stories around a biblical redemptive theme that would connect to the Anii culture while providing answers to barriers and gaps between God's redemptive plan in the Bible and Anii culture.

Despite their xenophobic tendencies, many young Anii men travel to neighbouring Nigeria for two or three years to work for money to bring back to their village. They not only brought back money, but also religion. The Anii people were one hundred percent Muslim when we came to live among them. Our plan was to use a theme of sacrifice to tie together the Bible stories and present Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice. As we began to

research sacrifice in the Anii culture, we quickly came to understand that sacrifice for the Anii is only transactional. If someone wanted to appease an angry spirit, they made a sacrifice. If someone wanted to have a child, they made a sacrifice. If someone wanted to succeed in work, they made a sacrifice. No one would ever think to make a sacrifice to atone for sin, demonstrate repentance, or restore relationships with God or humans. As we delved deeper into Anii culture through intentional conversations and interviews, we learned that Anii people valued relationships, and family relationships above all. We conducted a worldview survey. One of the questions we asked was, 'How can you tell if a person is a good person?' Every respondent began their answers with, 'They greet everyone they see properly'. Most of the respondents went on to mention caring for their family or exhibiting patience, or *suuru,* in their relationships with others (Stringer and Stringer 2003).

The concept of *suuru,* or patience, is most closely tied with wisdom and communal relationships. A person with *suuru* makes right judgements for the good of the community. These judgements most often seek to preserve or restore peace in relationships, particularly familial relationships. A person who has offended another comes to the offended party with an elder family member to ask for *suuru*. In this case, the elder family speaks to the offended party to entreat them to exhibit their *suuru* by entering back into a relationship with the person who offended them. If the offended party is from another family or clan, then the elders of each family may come together to exert their own *suuru* upon the situation. The offended party has a choice: act wisely by restoring relationship or risk being seen as someone without *suuru*. A person without *suuru* would not be well-regarded in the community.

In their history, the survival of the Anii people depended upon strong relationships and mutual protection. During the time of the slave trade, it was important for the community to protect each other against marauders from the South. The same forces that

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created xenophobia also forged deep bonds within the community, as the Anii people worked together to survive. Thus threats to the relationships within the community were serious issues that required relational intelligence and wisdom — *suuru*.

Our desire was to show that God was the ultimate source of *suuru* to restore relationship and community. We selected stories that showed God's original plan was to have a relationship and community with people. When people broke that relationship, God continued to work through people and families to bring people back to himself. He ultimately would bring complete restoration of community through his son Jesus, so that through Jesus people could become a part of God's family. The stories we chose focused on good and bad family relationships in the Bible and how God worked through them. The Old Testament stories focused on the families of characters such as Noah, Abraham, and David. However, as we approached the New Testament stories, we anticipated a problem.

At the time, in the early 2000's, some Bible translators in Muslim communities were advocating using alternate phrasing for divine familial terms. Many Islamic communities believe that referring to Jesus as God's son implies that God had sexual relations with Mary and Jesus was their child. Such an understanding of the phrase, 'God's son', is supreme heresy for Muslims. This understanding is also counter to biblical teaching.

We were unsure how our Anii friends would react to biblical stories calling Jesus God's son. The first story in the New Testament we crafted was Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would give birth even though she was a virgin. We chose to omit the portion in which Gabriel states that the child will be the son of God. We did not know how we would ultimately resolve the issue of divine familial terms in the Anii stories, but we did not want the first story about Jesus to place an insurmountable barrier between us and our Anii friends. First, we wanted to test the understanding of who Jesus was through

the listening of the stories. We tested each story we crafted by gathering groups of people to listen to the stories that had been crafted by our Anii story crafting team. We would then ask them questions to see if they understood the story and ask members of the group to retell the story. As an oral community, especially one with a historical distrust of outsiders, the Anii people were highly communal. Thus, we tested biblical stories in community not only because we wanted to hear from a variety of voices, but also simply because the village space was set up as a highly communal space. Compounds circled an open, communal space where families gathered together to cook, tell stories, and live in community. As we tested stories, it was the community as a whole who responded to those stories by discussing and interpreting the stories together.

One of these groups met at Madame Gomon's house. Fifteen women and five men met regularly to test all the stories we had crafted and recorded. They met in the courtyard at the centre of three mud-brick buildings that housed the Gomons, their children, their grandchildren, and the children given to them by other family members to rear as their own. The group included women from the local neighbourhood, who were members of the same clan as the Gomons. The men were mostly elderly men who could not go to the field or the forest to work. The testing had to happen during the afternoon rest time before the women had to begin preparing the evening meals. This was also the hottest part of the day. The courtyard was covered in mats. A few of the older men brought plastic chairs to sit upon. The women sat on the mats. Some were nursing babies; others were taking corn kernels off the cob. All of them were busy as children and chickens darted amongst them (Stringer 2003).

My wife and I arrived with much trepidation. We were introducing Jesus for the first time through the story of Jesus' birth. We were unsure of the reaction we would receive. We greeted each person. The greeting time often lasted thirty to forty minutes. After discussing some of the latest village news, we asked for permission to share the

story. After playing the story for the group twice, we decided to ask a very specific question before we asked any other questions. We simply asked, 'Who is Jesus?' There was about one minute of silence before Madame Gomon replied, '*Isa na Gajo kupigi na geng'* — 'Jesus is God's son, surely'. We were stunned. We were so stunned that our response was, 'But you don't believe that!' The whole group then said '*Ijaa* — it's the truth'. We asked Madame Gomon what she meant when she said that Jesus was God's son. She responded by saying that the story said that he was. We had been very careful not to use those words in the story, so we asked her if she could show us where in the story it said that Jesus was God's son. The group laughed. They said, 'Not this story, the whole story'. They meant all the stories that we had tested with them up to that point. After every new story we tested, the group had retold the stories and discussed them late into the night. They would invite other members of their family to listen to the story, or they would tell the story to themselves. As a family, they would discuss the stories and ask how God wanted them to live. Madame Gomon had begun telling her children that they should start following the God of the Bible since she had decided that every story from the Bible she heard was true. She also said that as her family listened to and retold the stories to one another, they experienced less conflict with each other and had more *suuru* for one another (Stringer 2003).

The testing group had learned about God's *suuru* through his dealing with Adam and Eve, his saving of Noah's family, his choosing of Abraham, and his promise of an everlasting royal family to David. God works through families. In the Isaiah story, God promised his people that a person would come who would restore their relationship to him. Around their own family cooking fires, the testing group discussed what the promises of God to his people must mean. They also wondered what those promises might mean for their own families. Only very wise elders with *suuru* could restore a relational rift as great as that between God and people. They had decided that the person God would

send would have to have the same *suuru* as God. That could only mean that the person God would send must be from God's own family. When the group heard about Jesus and his miraculous birth by a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit, they decided together that Jesus must be God's son and that he was the one whose *suuru* could restore people to God.

4.3   The Place of Community in Oral Theology

As seen in the vignette above, the Anii place high value on their communal relationships. Their high value on community is in part a product of the historical need to rely upon one another in the face of slave traders. Their survival depended upon it. The Anii are also an oral culture, and oral cultures highly value community relationships.[26] Oral communities share information, perform education, spread news, and store memory with a reliance upon oral discourse. These communities must rely upon the interdependent relationships within the community for oral discourse. Right decision making happens within these communal relationships and right decision making strengthens the relationships in the community. So, for the Anii, *suuru* comes from the community and provides benefits for the community. This communal approach to relationships forms and informs an oral interpretation and application of Scripture.

The following section explores the place of community in oral theology by focusing on its place in oral hermeneutics. First, it details Steffen and Bioraker's description of the place of orality in hermeneutics. Next, it describes the gaps in their theorization of oral hermeneutics: the danger of supposing surplus meaning in Scripture; the need to include all of Scripture, as opposed to just narrative portions of Scripture, in oral hermeneutics;

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[26] In the chapter two vignette, I describe the oral characteristics of Anii society.

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and the need for local, communal engagement in oral hermeneutics. Finally, this section describes a communal approach to oral hermeneutics.

4.3.1 Steffen and Bioraker's Oral Hermeneutics

Steffen and Bjoraker have significantly progressed the debate around the method of oral hermeneutics in their *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics: As Good Today as It Was for the Hebrew Bible and First-Century Christianity* (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020). The book is organized into three parts: demonstrations, propositions, and echoes. The first part, 'demonstrations', is a representation of a storying session led by Bjoraker along with reflections on the story session itself. This is intended to introduce the concept of oral hermeneutics. The authors insist throughout the book that oral hermeneutics is synonymous with *story* hermeneutics. The utilization of a storying session to demonstrate oral hermeneutics is emblematic of this argument. In the second part of the book, 'propositions', the authors explore the place of orality in Scripture by: (1) making an argument for oral hermeneutics to be given a place at the table with textual hermeneutics; (2) introducing the concept of character theology as a framework for oral hermeneutics; (3) giving a critique of other oral hermeneutic methods while advocating their own model through asking character-centric questions. An example of their character-based theology is in their treatment of the Elisha and Naaman story (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:252–82). In this example, the storyteller skilfully guides the group through probing questions about Naaman's actions, motivations, and character. In doing so, the authors claim to have revealed four theological truths: '(1) grace: prevenient and saving, (2) conversion as holistic transformation, (3) the immutability of God, and (4) the messianic (or Christian) paradox' (2020:277). The final part of the book, 'echoes', is another description of a storying session along with reflections intended to reinforce concepts introduced in part two, 'propositions'.

Steffen and Bjoraker view orality through the lens of communication preferences. This approach to orality is founded on the traditional categories originally expounded by Ong (Ong 2012). However, they move beyond Ong's binary approach to orality and literacy to describe orality as reliance upon characteristics of orality which exist on a continuum. A summary of their take on this continuum of orality is as follows:

> While there are universal features connected to orality, these are expressed locally and generationally. Orality is expressed through oralities. Summarizing, orality refers to a preferred way to hear, process, communicate, and remember. It is a multisensory mode of communication that weds the ear (sound) and eye (symbols, rituals, body language). Oral learners are those who prefer to learn through oral means, think holistically and more circularly (as opposed to linearly), remember visually, and prefer to communicate concretely and affectively. (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:72)

The above definition of orality is a positive move forward; however, it remains incomplete. Orality is a communication style but is also a way of being in the world in which relationships and communal identity are core to understanding.

Steffen and Bjoraker claim that Christian Scripture itself is oral in nature, relying heavily on the research of scholars such as Werner Kelber, James Dunn, and J.A. Loubser (Kelber 1983; Dunn 2013; Loubser and Kelber 2013). Steffen then concludes, 'A major insight I was about to discover on this journey was that *without an understanding of orality, one's understanding of Scripture would be minimized*' (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:69). The term 'minimised' is potentially problematic if Steffen is saying that one could only gain a minimal understanding of Scripture without attending to its oral nature. Perhaps a better way of expressing the need for understanding the oral nature of Scripture would be to say that one's understanding would be incomplete rather than minimal. It is also important to note that, in describing the oral nature of Scripture, Steffen and Bjoraker seem to equate the orality of Scripture only with narrative portions of Scripture.

Steffen and Bjoraker also argue that hermeneutic practices should reflect the epistemology of the culture of those doing the interpreting as well as that of the original audience. Given the oral nature of Scripture, particularly that of the Hebrew Old Testament, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* (*ROH*) explores the orality underlying

much of ancient Hebrew hermeneutics and calls for a *ressourcement* of this ancient form of biblical interpretation (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:163).

4.3.1.1 The Danger of Secret Meaning

For Bjoraker, Hebraic hermeneutics is founded upon an oral epistemology which is pitted over and against Enlightenment epistemology. Bjoraker describes Enlightenment epistemology as an epistemological shift during the 18th century towards disengaged reason which relies upon the application of rational scientific method to biblical interpretation (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:142). *ROH* contends that this approach to hermeneutics is prevalent today in what it calls 'textual hermeneutics'. While Enlightenment epistemology underlies textual hermeneutics, Bjoraker contends for a Hebraic epistemology as the prototypical example of oral hermeneutics. He describes the rabbinic *Haggadic* (telling) tradition that explores the multiple layers of meaning of a biblical narrative. This hermeneutical tradition is characterized by the acronym, PaRDeS, the Hebrew word for 'orchard'. PaRDeS stands for *peshat, remez, darash,* and *sod. Peshat* is the literal meaning of the text. *Remez* is the symbolic or allegorical meaning of the text. *Daresh* is the interpretive application of the text. *Sod* is the mystical meaning of the text. The assumption on the part of the author is that every biblical narrative has a surplus of meaning.[27] This surplus of meaning must be carefully brought to the surface through an engagement of the narrative with ongoing discussion and 'synergistic conversation' (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:162).

There are many potential interpretive dangers lurking behind a hermeneutical tradition that assumes a mystic or secret meaning underlying every narrative. The Hebraic or oral hermeneutic proposed by Bjoraker focuses on meaning *in front of the text*, the

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[27] This concept comes from Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976). For this concept, the authors of *ROH* cite Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

meaning gleaned by the reader/hearer of the biblical narrative, to the detriment of an understanding of the meaning *of the text* and the meaning *behind the text*, the meaning inherent in the narrative itself and the intended meaning of the author.

4.3.1.2 <u>The Need for the Whole of Scripture</u>

The question then becomes: can an oral hermeneutic adequately convey the authoritative meaning of Scripture in an oral society? The intention of the Steffen and Bjoraker was to affirm the place of narrative as equal and authoritative in hermeneutics. They refer to Hans Frei in regards to the importance of biblical narrative: 'It is not going too far to say that the story is the meaning or, alternatively, that the meaning emerges from the story form, rather than being merely illustrated by it…' (Frei 1974:280). However, in their attempt to privilege narrative and Hebraic hermeneutics, the authors ignore the propositional content of Scripture in favour of narrative. Narrative logic and narrative knowing are held as the standards for an oral-Hebraic epistemology.[28] As such, oral hermeneutics espoused by Steffen and Bjoraker focuses solely on the narrative portions of Scripture.

Steffen and Bjoraker rightfully posit 'we cannot cash in the stories for some abstracted universal timeless truth that leaves the story behind' (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:145). At the same time, it is dangerous to discard the non-narrative genres of the Bible. Steffen and Bjoraker are advocating an "Eclipse of Biblical Non-Narrative". Steffen and Bjoraker's oral hermeneutics advocate an oral prerequisite for the source text rather an oral lens of interpretation. An oral lens of interpretation can be applied to non-narrative as well as narrative forms of Scripture. An oral lens of interpretation for the *whole* Bible provides the foundation for local theologizing.

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[28] In making this point, the authors rely heavily upon the work of Kevin Bradt (Bradt 1997).

4.3.1.3 The Need for Local, Communal Engagement

Steffen and Bjoraker have advanced the debate around the concept of oral hermeneutics; however, the general position of their argument is towards what they call 'Bible communicators' who, in *ROH,* overwhelmingly refer to outsiders guiding local people in theological reflection. Maduku would call this *la colonialité épistémique de l'interprétation de la parole de Dieu*, the epistemic colonialization of the interpretation of the word of God (Maduku 2021:348). Maduku presented his chapter in a conference on the interface between orality and the Bible in Africa organized by the Department of Biblical Theology in the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa on 11-13 September 2018 (Mundele 2021). Maduku calls upon his experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo to illustrate the ineffectiveness of approaches to hermeneutics that do not involve the community interpreting Scripture to speak to problems in their everyday lives. Maduku likens his hermeneutic approach to a community working together to weave a large mat. Interpretation of Scripture happens as the local community lives life together. Children are apprenticed into the skill of interpretation as Scripture is shared in community and the meaning of Scripture is interpreted in community. For Maduku, Scripture is living and active; therefore, the interpretation of Scripture in oral communities must be in a place of life and community. 'On est loin ici d'un ouvrage solitaire [here, one is far from a solitary work]' (Maduku 2021:470).

4.3.2 A Communal Approach to Oral Hermeneutics

An oral hermeneutical lens would move beyond story hermeneutics to include the interpretive community. Again, the question remains: if oral hermeneutics places emphasis on the local, oral community in interpretation, what prevents that community from assigning interpretive meanings of Scripture based on their own cultural interpretive

grid rather than the sense of Scripture itself? Is oral hermeneutics then a species of cultural-linguistic theologizing (Lindbeck 1984)? In oral hermeneutics, as in textual hermeneutics, there are dangers of allowing tradition and culture to supersede the authority or Scripture itself; however, it is not inevitable.

Knighton asserts that an oral-communal approach to interpretation in oral communities avoids the dangers of purely reader-response interpretation associated with textual hermeneutics (Knighton 2006:149). Knighton describes orality among the Karamojong people of Kenya. For Knighton, orality serves to preserve the Karamojong community, particularly its social structure. Knighton explores the orature of Karamojong prayer. Among the Karamojong, the elders are responsible for reciting prayer. In Karamojong social structure, this means the elders hold a place of honour and power. The oral performance of prayer by the elders serves a critical role in society. Knighton uses speech-act theory to describe the impact of oral performances on Karimojong society. The performances of the prayer serve the spiritual protection of the community. They also teach values to the community, elicit the memory of the community, and reinforce the socio-political power of the elders in the community. The locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions of Karamojong orature are done in and for the community.

> Oral communication is necessarily intersubjective, so more integrative and centrifugal for the language, which is able to use memory in service of the present…This contrasts with literacy, which sets memory over against the contemporary perspective and is accessible to the individual and subjective affectations, not necessarily susceptible to relationships (Knighton 2006:149).

According to Knighton, the total oral speech-act of discourse in the present entails the illocutionary force of meaning to a greater extent than that of reading abstracted texts (Knighton 2006:149). Oral communication is a highly relational enterprise that not only serves to strengthen the community but also provides the relational context necessary for semiotics and interpretation. In order to communicate effectively, oral communication is dependent upon the social context of the communication event (Kelber 2013:459). The

social and communal milieu of the event serves to protect meaning embedded in social memory.

Rynkowich posits that memory in oral cultures is different from textual cultures (Rynkiewich 2007:50). He explores the impact of oral mindsets on hermeneutics in oral cultures. Rynkowich calls this ethnohermeneutics, or local hermeneutics. He owes the term ethnohermeneutics to Caldwell (Caldwell 1999). Rynkowich suggests that every culture has its own hermeneutic principles and processes. Rynkowich is writing specifically about Filipino culture, but he makes general observations regarding hermeneutics in oral communities. For Rynkowich, oral hermeneutics is governed by community and relationships.

> How might relationships affect hermeneutics? Some of the hermeneutical presuppositions of literate peoples are that the primary purpose of Scripture is to transmit truth: truth isolated from relationships (universal), truth encapsulated in propositions (verbal), and truth independent of community (private/personal). By contrast, oral interpreters will want to discover the relationships in the story. The point worth discovering is how what is said affects our relationships, not primarily whether it is true or not. (Rynkiewich 2007:51)

Rynkowich refers to the dissertation of a long-time missionary in Bangladesh, Roy McIntyre (McIntyre 2005). MyIntyre intended to study the impact of using local ceremonies and traditional dramas to find bridges between Scripture and the local culture. He discovered that the greatest impact was upon the discipleship of the hermeneutical community that was created through the project. He found as he relinquished control of the project to the group, they grew spiritually as they worked together to discover bridges to their own culture. The eventual project of using local dramas to share Scripture had a significant impact. In McIntyre's case, not only did the communal approach to hermeneutics have impact on the acceptance of the local dramas, it also resulted in a clearer and more accurate understanding of the biblical text (McIntyre 2005:247).

Thus, community and communal relationships not only impact the reception of Scripture; they also impact the understanding and interpretation of Scripture in oral societies. This means that oral theologizing relies heavily on communal theologizing.

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Tradition plays a key role in communal theologizing, but communal theologizing also happens in the present where communities interpret Scripture through a lens of interwoven relationships. Interpreted meaning is viewed less in terms of abstracted truths than impact on right decision within that relational network. How then, can there be authoritative meaning in Scripture? If the Scripture principle is to be the guide for oral theologizing, what role can the community play if it is essential to oral theologizing? In the next section, I will explore Vanhoozer's theatrical model as a suitable framework for theologizing in community.

4.4   Community in Vanhoozer's Theatrical Model

I mentioned in chapter three that Vanhoozer developed the term canonical-linguistic theology for his theatrical model in response to Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theology (Lindbeck 1984). In so doing, Vanhoozer positions himself as a corrective to the cultural-linguistic turn which saw the interpretive use of Scripture in the church as a first principle for theology. Instead, Vanhoozer describes Scripture — God in communicative action — as the first principle of theology to which all other aspects of theologizing must subordinate. So, Scripture is God's communicative act through which he creates a people, the church. Scripture is a covenant document which forms and informs the church. The church participates in the theo-drama through responding to Scripture. The illocutions of Scripture are authoritative. The church's response to those illocutions in the form of tradition facilitates the interpretation of Scripture but is always subject to correction by Scripture. Canon rather than culture has magisterial authority in interpretation.

4.4.1   Tradition, tradition, traditions

Vanhoozer provides a helpful distinction between Tradition, tradition, and traditions. He defines capital-T Tradition as 'the Word of God, Jesus Christ, that God consigns to the ministry of the church' (Vanhoozer 2005:155). The canon, as God's divine discourse

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through which God reveals himself, is Tradition. On the other hand, the Church's ongoing interpretation of Scripture and the ongoing transmission of the faith found in Scripture, Vanhoozer terms 'tradition', with a lower case 't'. Tradition in this sense is the ongoing performance of the script of Scripture through space and time of the catholic, universal, Church. 'Traditions' refer to the historically specific and culture-bound expressions of the performance. Although Vanhoozer recognizes the need and necessity of all three forms of tradition as already described, he warns against the temptation of making 'tradition' — or the interpretation of Scripture through the church— a first principle in theology.

> I believe in the church. God has called a people to be his own, the body of Christ, the creation of the temple of the Holy Spirit. The question is whether, and to what extent, this "church" may be identified with the diverse ecclesial bodies and their human histories. I believe that the church is one; but I do not see it. I believe the church is holy; yet the visible church does not always appear so. It is precisely because of its eschatological nature—its position between the "already" and the "not yet"—that the church's life and language cannot (not yet!) serve as the primary criterion for Christian doctrine. This is also why we cannot simply presume that visible "tradition" and invisible "Tradition" invariably coincide (Vanhoozer 2005:163–4).

4.4.2   Performance II

In Vanhoozer's theatrical model, the church embodies the Scriptural text in much the same way an acting company embodies the text of a script. But in what Vanhoozer calls 'Performance II' interpretation, the interpretive performance of the script constitutes the meaning for that script. In Performance II interpretation, which Vanhoozer critiques, the sense of Scripture is found through the tradition (the Church's performance of the Scripture). Authority then resides in an interpretive community's understanding of Scripture rather than Scripture itself. The actors/performers have the final say in the meaning of the play rather than the playwright himself. This interpretive stance privileges the performer over the intentions of the author — in the case of Christian interpretation of Scripture, the Church over God, the divine playwright.

4.4.3 Performance I

Vanhoozer advocates an approach he calls 'Performance I' interpretation. For Vanhoozer, Scripture is not only a script to be performed, but it is also a performance of God in self-communication, the theo-drama. God is not only saying something through Scripture. He is doing something. Thus, Scripture is divine speech-act. In a sense, the canon of Scripture may be viewed as a unified speech-act that is a covenant calling the church into being, into reacting, and into participating in the theo-drama of God's redemptive plan. The canon directs the ecclesial company in how to participate in the theo-drama.

If Performance II interpretation does not concern itself with the intentions of the author, Performance I interpretation seeks to understand the intentions of the author. In the case of Christian Scripture, the Church sees the canon as divine discourse. The author of Scripture is God, who is not only revealing himself through Scripture, but giving directions on how the Church fittingly participates in the theo-drama revealed in Scripture and the theo-drama being enacted by Scripture. So, the posture of Performance I interpretation is recognizing what God is saying and doing in Scripture and responding to it in a way commensurate with the intentions of the author. Performance I assumes the meaning of the text pre-exists its communal performance. Therefore, authority and meaning reside with the divine author through his self-communication through Scripture.

4.5 Community in Oral Theology

In the first section of this chapter, I told the story of Madame Gomon and the community of which she was a part. Her community is an oral community with high values on relationship and wisdom in relationships, or *suuru*. The communal relationships within the canonical presentation of Bible stories and the communal approach to interpretation of those stories as a whole led to right understanding of Scripture and right doctrinal appropriation: Jesus is the son of God.

This section seeks to use Vanhoozer's theatrical model to assess to what extent Vanhoozer's model might form a framework for oral theologizing that takes into account the role of communities, such as Madame Gomon's, in such theologizing. Vanhoozer's model already has an understanding of community. The theatrical model begins with an understanding of God as a triune God in divine self-communication. The divine Trinity is inherently relational. If disciples are to become 'little Christs', then they are meant to be relational beings. The Church, which is often described as a family, is the earthly representation of the eternal communion between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 13:35). The Church enters into the divine communion as it responds to and participates in the divine theo-drama of redemption and performs fittingly on the world stage. Vanhoozer's model might provide a framework for oral communities to participate fittingly in the theo-drama.

4.5.1 Standards for Communal Oral Theologizing

Earlier, I pointed out that Vanhoozer helpfully delineates three forms of tradition: Tradition, tradition, and traditions. Implementing these three forms of tradition in an appropriate hierarchy could be a framework for an oral hermeneutical approach.

4.5.1.1 <u>Tradition</u>

If one takes Tradition to be God's self-communication through the canon, then the canon of Scripture provides the magisterial standard for oral theologizing. Thus, in Vanhoozer's model the first standard employed in communal interpretation of Scripture should be *canonicity*. Canonicity is the criterion for determining whether or not a community's interpretation of Scripture is fitting. A person has canon-sense if they are able to fit themselves within the metanarrative of the theo-drama, a narrative that precedes its human performance. This fittingness is found in consistency and coherence of Scripture with the living faith of the disciple (Vanhoozer 2009). In the same way, oral people, who

exhibit a preference for story, often describe truth in terms of the consistency of the message and lives of disciples in community as well as the coherence of the narrative itself.

Madame Gomon's family displayed canon-sense as they engaged with the series of biblical stories that showed God working in and through families. The truths of the Bible stories were proved as the community lived out the directions provided in the stories in their own lives and relationships. The authorial intent of Scripture was revealed as the community engaged with biblical stories — Performance I interpretation.

4.5.1.2 <u>tradition</u>

My wife and I were concerned that Madame Gomon and her family would not interpret the Bible stories in a way that was consistent with how church tradition throughout history has interpreted the person of Jesus, God's son.

The correct interpretation of Scripture and the subsequent performance in oral theologizing is not only done within community; it is also judged as fitting by wider tradition. Tradition shows how Christian disciples have attempted to participate fittingly in the theo-drama throughout history. Magisterial authority lies within the canon itself; however, the interpretation of Scripture may be judged as fitting if it is in alignment with traditional approaches. Thus, *catholicity* becomes the communal standard for oral theologizing. *Catholicity* is a ministerial standard rather than a magisterial standard.

Developing a catholic interpretation of Scripture would have been impossible for Madame Gomon and her family without some outside help. Not only was there no Scripture in their language, but also most of the community could not read in French with any significant understanding. Commentaries and exegetical aids were inaccessible for them. My wife and I provided a conduit to catholic interpretation of the person of Jesus. Although our intent was for the Anii people to self-theologize, in the absence of any connections with church or church history, we framed their theological interpretation of

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Scripture through the stories we chose to tell. We chose Bible stories that would reinforce the concept of God's family and God's *suuru*. These choices did have an influence on the community's theologizing. Therefore, one can say neither that Madame Gomon and her family engaged in completely local theologizing nor that the vignette describes a completely oral process of theologizing because of our intervention. However, the communal approach to engaging with the Bible stories was oral theologizing. This highlights the general need for resources among oral communities that allow them to access church history and church tradition through oral methods of communication.

4.5.1.3 traditions

Vanhoozer describes traditions as those socio-culturally specific and historically bound standards of interpretation that provide a standard of *contextual sensitivity* to the fitting interpretation of Scripture. This standard is also subject to the magisterial authority of Tradition while also being informed by the ministerial authority of tradition. This criterion is particularly important to oral societies in that doctrine not only fits within the theo-drama of Scripture and within a larger historical social tradition, but it must also fit with the cultural context of the receptor audience (the world in front of the text). This is the essence of translation. Vanhoozer suggests, however, that theologizing within various cultural contexts might be better served by the concept of transposition. In other words, theologizing in different cultures is less of a word for word translation of the theo-drama and more of an improvisation of the theo-drama. This improvisation adheres to the truths of Scripture without simply reproducing it.

In the case of Madame Gomon and her family, their interpretation of the doctrine of Jesus was formed and informed by their own understanding of familial relationships and *suuru*. They exhibited cultural sensitivity in utilising their own worldview to transpose the truths of the Scripture into their own culture. At the same time, their interpretation was based on the canonical understanding of God, his family, and how they

worked through history. Their interpretation was also in alignment with the catholic interpretation informed by tradition as provided through the framing of the overarching story line.

4.5.2   Limitations of Vanhoozer's Model for Oral Communal Theology

As seen above, Vanhoozer's theatrical model of theology is highly communal. However, the concept and function of community are somewhat different in oral theology. For Vanhoozer, the ecclesial community, both local and universal, provides guides for the interpretation of Scripture. Participation of the individual believer in the theo-drama is facilitated by the 'tradition' of church history and the 'traditions' of the culture of the interpretive community.

As much as Vanhoozer would like to move interpretation and fitting participation into the real-world lives of the believers, he still does so through reading. Today's reading is a solitary exercise which results in individual interpretation, or at least individual assent to communal understanding. In oral cultures, however, interpretation and decision-making, listening and dialog, necessarily operate at the communal level.

Madame Gomon and her community made decisions corporately and interpreted Scripture together. My wife and I gave them access to the 'tradition' of the church, but their interpretation of Scripture happened under trees and around cooking fires — it happened together. They decided that Jesus must be the son of God, together. This ideal of community decision making is also clearly seen in the concept of *ubuntu* which is prevalent in Bantu-speaking communities of Africa. The concept of *ubuntu* suggests that and individual's identity is interconnected with the community in which they live. The well-being of the community is synonymous with their own well-being and their own identity is co-substantiated through interaction with others (Ogude 2018). This sense of community supersedes individual rights and decision-making.

This communal decision-making is similar to the events in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Acts. Peter had been sent to the house of Cornelius, a non-Jewish person. As Peter spoke to Cornelius and those in the house, the Holy Spirit came upon all of them (Acts 11:14-5). Similarly, Paul shared the gospel in Philippi, and both Lydia's (16:15) and the jailer's (16:32) households were baptized. In case of Cornelius' household, the Spirit fell upon an entire group of people. In the cases of Lydia and the jailer, the Spirit operated on a communal level to lead entire households to truth, which resulted in faith and obedience in baptism. The church is bound together by the Spirit, not as a collection of individuals but as an ecclesial body. Since oral culture tends toward the communal rather than the individual, oral theology is particularly receptive to this communal-relational aspect of the Spirit.

Chinese theologian, Damon So, has remarked that his own oral background and culture has enriched his understanding of the Spirit. So demonstrated that his understanding of the Chinese term for spirit revealed a unique understanding of how the outer and inner person is interconnected (So 2006:273). So recognized that the Chinese term for spirit could serve to show how the biblical revelation of Jesus' words and actions could reveal the nature of his communion with the Father through the Spirit. This revelation of the Spirit nuanced his own understanding of the communion between Father, Son, and Spirit. The importance of community and relationship in Chinese oral culture moved So's theological understanding of the nature of the Trinity forward in new ways. As oral cultures begin to engage with Scripture on their own terms in light of their own preference for community, oral theology will not only come into its own, but it will also enrich the theological tradition of the global church community.

Asian-American Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong would agree. He advocates for a post-Pentecostal hermeneutic which takes seriously the communal nature of oral cultures (Yong 2017). Yong equates oral hermeneutics with communal hermeneutics. He

describes the epistemological difference between oral hermeneutics and textual hermeneutics in terms of community and individual. Textual epistemology has its strengths in logical argumentation and descriptive depth. Oral epistemology harnesses the power of social dynamics and rhetorical performance in communication (Yong 2017:46). Orality presumes an intersubjective ontology and morality in the sense that the fluctuations of the spoken word do not merely fade into oblivion but spark cosmic forces and reactions.

> It is not as if orality is more audience- or reader-oriented, as might be emphasized in (postmodern) hermeneutical constructs, even if this is not entirely incorrect. More accurate would be to say that textual referentiality enables focus on the particular and the determinate while oral interrelationality presumes a more open-ended and even cosmic situatedness within which communicative speech acts are sounded (Yong 2017:47).

Through the oral approach Yong suggests that the theologian move beyond seeing the Bible as a source of information and towards seeing the Bible as being a means of experiencing the saving work of God (Yong 2017:49). The experience of God brings the believer into communion with Jesus and the Father through the work of the Spirit. A communal approach to hermeneutics provides an insight into how oral engagement with the written Scripture can provide understanding and guidelines for fittingly participating in God's theo-drama. Yong believed this sort of approach to hermeneutics is more likely to lead to personal, ecclesial, and communal transformation than traditional approaches (Yong 2017:56).

Vanhoozer's model also seeks personal, ecclesial, and communal transformation. His theatrical approach to hermeneutics adheres to the supreme authority of Scripture while moving the task of interpretation from the solitary mind of one individual to that of the interpretive community. However, he does so within the context of a literate Western church. As such, he is forced to use the metaphor of a theatrical company performing within a certain interpretive tradition. This is a useful metaphor, but it lacks the full force of an epistemic and ethical commitment to community and relationship. These aspects of

community and relationship are already inherent in oral cultures. In fact, oral conceptualizations of community are much richer and more nuanced than those of the Western world. Therefore, Vanhoozer's model for communal hermeneutics is appropriate for oral theology. At the same time, the commitment to community within oral theology is the proper domain for developing his model further as oral communities engage with one another, their local communities, and the community of the global church in theologizing. In this sense, an oral theological model is uniquely placed to advance Vanhoozer's model.

4.6   Conclusion

Using Vanhoozer's theatrical model as a framework for oral theologizing within community suggests oral hermeneutics should be guided by: (1) canonical understanding which places the Scripture within the overarching narrative of the Bible; (2) catholic understanding which places Scripture within tradition of the universal church; (3) contextual understanding which engages Scripture with the local context of the interpretive community.

Vanhoozer's theodramatic approach places magisterial authority in Scripture while emphasizing the ministerial authority of the interpretive community. Similarly Madame Gomon and her family engaged in communal interpretation of the biblical stories. My wife and I provided a conduit to the interpretive tradition of the *catholic* church community by making thematic choices regarding the stories we chose to tell. In the end, the local community engaging with the overarching theo-drama of Scripture arrived at correct interpretation of Scripture as well as correct doctrinal understanding of Jesus. In showing the real-life example of the Anii and Madame Gomon's family, I have shown how oral theology might enrich and advance Vanhoozer's model. In oral theology, community is not simply a way of providing guardrails for individual interpretation of Scripture. The community not only interprets together, but the community is also the

locus of interpretation and decision-taking. This is done in community for the sake of relationships within those communities. Oral communal hermeneutics is the most appropriate domain for developing Vanhoozer's approach further. The next chapter will explore how a communal approach to theologizing in oral communities allows oral churches to embody the theo-drama in local contexts.

Chapter 5: Embodied Theology

5.1   Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the role of the community in oral theologizing and demonstrated how Vanhoozer's model might provide a framework for oral theologizing that takes into account the role of community. This chapter will delve into a central aspect of oral communities: embodied cognition. This chapter will follow the same structure as the others. I will begin with a vignette from my own experiences that highlight the theme of the chapter. Next, I will define cognition, embodied cognition, and detail the various characteristics of embodied cognition among oral people. Next, I will explore how Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach might provide a framework for an embodied approach to theologizing. I will explore the sapiential dimension of Vanhoozer's approach and his prosaic, phronetic, and prophetic categories of theology. I will then explore how these categories might frame an embodied oral theology. I argue that an oral embodied theology is directed by doctrine, a doctrine which is embedded in the embodied performance of oral theologizing.

5.2   Swami Muktanand: AVignette

I first met Swami Muktanand — or Swamiji, his disciples affectionately called him — in 2007. Tricia, my wife, and I moved our family from Benin to India in 2005. Instead of a village, we lived in Bengaluru, one of the most populous cities in south India. Instead of living in a Muslim community, our neighbours were Hindus. Through our friendship with veteran missionaries Brian and Linda Peterson, we became interested in understanding how theologizing could look in a Hindu context. It was during this time that we met Swami Muktanand. I was speaking at a conference on orality in Delhi. The participants were primarily Indian pastors. These pastors had all come from Christian backgrounds. As I asked them how they might contextualize their language for a Hindi speaking Hindu

audience, they seemed terrified. Anything that had to do with Hinduism was evil in their eyes. Hindus had persecuted their families and they equated Hinduism with idolatry. These pastors were from Christian backgrounds which meant they had little to no personal experience with Hinduism. One pastor told me that a Hindu could never become a Christian. Another said that was not true, but a Hindu must become a Christian in every sense: they must leave their father and mother, they must dress differently, they must attend "church" by which he meant a building where people sat on pews; sang from hymnals; and quietly listened to a sermon. I had great hope, when during a later panel discussion, a fellow speaker who was the pastor of a rather large church in North India was asked how to teach theology to oral people. His answer surprised me. He said, 'If you want to teach my people theology, then teach them to sing!' I excitedly sat with him at lunchtime to discover how he taught theology through worship. I was disappointed when he said that there are many well-written hymns and praise songs from Europe and America that churches in India have translated and sing each Sunday. Still, his statement '…teach them to sing' reverberated in my mind as I went to have dinner with my friends, and fellow Western missionaries, Brian and Linda Peterson. Brian asked if I would also meet with their friend who was staying with them at the time. Their friend, Swamiji, had a congregation of mostly illiterate people to whom he often told illustrative stories, but he was also interested in learning how to tell biblical stories. I responded that I would love to "train" their friend. I arrived at their flat that evening. As I entered the flat, I could smell the heavy aroma of sandalwood incense. I was shocked to see Brian and Linda's friend, dressed in the saffron robes of a swami, a Hindu religious leader, waiting to greet me with a large grin. Swamiji's congregation met at his Ashram, a Hindu spiritual centre, on the Ganges River in Hinduism's holy city of Varanasi. That evening, I experienced my first Christ puja, a worship experience in Hindu contextualized style. I also began my journey with Swamiji towards learning what it truly meant to '…teach them to sing'.

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Though born in South Africa, Swami Muktanand returned to India, his home country, as a young missionary. He worked as a missionary for about ten years before deciding that the Western version of Christianity he espoused was unenticing to the Hindus among whom he ministered. He learned that Western Christian "church" was also not the only liturgical version of Christianity available. Swami Muktanand realized that a Hindu who converts to Christianity is seen as someone who has completely rejected their community, family, and culture. In turn, their community often rejects them.

For the most part, the liturgy, symbols, and theologizing of the Indian Church mirrored the liturgy, symbols, and theologizing of Western churches and their missionaries. From the format of church services to the written theology produced by church leaders, the Indian church often copy-and-pasted the traditions and normative values of Western churches. A Westerner entering a typical Indian church would recognize the pews facing a pastor and worship band who would use typical Western instruments; they might recognize the format of worship followed by a sermon; they might even recognize the tune of some of the songs. Churches often required members to forgo the Hindu symbols and practices that they held prior to their conversion. But Swami Muktanand began to understand Hinduism as more cultural identity than religion. As he later wrote, 'Hinduism isn't a religion; it is a parliament of religions. Others say that it is a way of life' (Muktanand 2007). Instead of asking Hindus to give up their cultural identity and take on a Western Christian identity, Swami Muktanand began to believe that they could retain their Hindu cultural identity while following Jesus without compromise.

Swami Muktanand practised what he preached when he underwent the years of training and religious ceremonies necessary to become a Swami, a type of Hindu religious teacher. As a Swami, he took on ascetic vows and became a traveling teacher — much like other great teachers in the Scripture such as Paul and Jesus. As he travelled, Swamiji invited other Hindus to become followers of Jesus. Swamiji's disciples became part of

the Yeshu Bhakti movement, a movement of Hindus throughout India who chose to follow Jesus (Yeshu) and Jesus only. Swami Muktanand became an important teacher within this movement and was deeply involved in guiding the theology of the movement and its adherents.

The theology of Yeshu Bhaktas is a deeply embodied one. Hinduism revolves around important events in the lives of the gods, with festivals that invite participants to remember the stories of those events through tradition and ritual. In the same way, Yeshu Bhaktas remember important events in the Christian calendar, such as Easter and Christmas through their own tradition and rituals. Swami Muktanand often travelled to lead groups of Yeshu Bhaktas in celebration and use that opportunity to remind Yeshu Bhaktas of key events and principles in the life of Yeshu.

On a more regular basis, groups of Yeshu Bhaktas meet for satsangs, which are Hindu worship ceremonies. These satsangs are composed of a variety of people — they might be all women, groups of couples, or families, and they often function as house churches. Though most Hindu satsangs centre around an idol, Yeshu Bhaktas use no images of God. However, Yeshu Bhaktas retain the intricate liturgy and symbolism of satsangs. During satsangs, they sit on the floor, light incense and oil lamps, and decorate with flowers. The colours, items, and songs used in a satsang hold rich meanings that Yeshu Bhaktas reinterpret and imbue with Christian theological meaning. For example, coconuts occupy an important place in satsangs and pujas. They are offered to gods or placed on altars. They are sometimes said to represent various gods in different ways. Swami Muktanand used coconuts to represent the eucharist. As he tore the coconut husk, he described how Yeshu was ridiculed and mocked. As he broke the coconut, he described how Yeshu was broken for human sins, and how Yeshu's blood flowed for us, in much the same way as the coconut water flowed from the coconut. In this way, these liturgies

and symbols allow Yeshu Bhaktas to embody, internalize, and remember theological truths.

The satsang liturgy formed the backdrop and shape for much of Swami Muktanand's explicit theologizing. During satsangs, Bhaktas sing bhajans, devotional songs containing religious themes. Appropriately, 'bhajan' can literally mean 'sharing', as it is during bhajans that Hindu religious teachers expound on religious themes. Swami Muktanand, like most Hindu religious teachers, would pause a bhajan to expound on the religious themes within that bhajan. His teaching often ended with his own spontaneous praise or poetry. After the satsang, if Bhaktas had theological questions, they would approach Swami Muktanand to ask them. These questions were mostly questions about how the truths of God might impact their everyday lives and decision-making.

After my first meeting with Swamiji, I learned that one of the main reasons my friends had asked me to meet Swamiji was that they thought I might help them in their quest to help Swamiji base more of his teaching on Scripture. During the worship services, Swamiji quoted Scripture as he either expounded upon the meaning of the symbols or explained the Christian theology behind the bhajans they sang. One such bhajan is a bhajan sung in Sanskrit by most young Hindus every morning as a universal Hindu prayer. Most of these young Hindus don't understand Sanskrit, so Swamiji would ask them if he could translate for them. The lyrics translated into English mean: 'Lead us from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality'. Swami Muktanand would then carefully unpack the meaning of the song for them and would share with them John 14:6-7, 'Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him' (NIV). He would show how Jesus fulfilled the words of the ancient prayer as the way of knowledge, the light of truth, and eternal life. He would then explain that now that they knew the meaning

of the song, they could know Jesus. Swami used Scripture to imbue the incense, the flowers, the traditional Hindu setting, with biblical truth. However, when it came to answering questions about everyday living, Swami Muktanand tended to rely on his own genius to give theological answers to difficult questions using pithy sayings, earthly stories, or intellectual reasoning.

Not all of Swami Muktanand's theologizing took place through explicitly oral mediums. He answered theological questions, argued for the validity of the Yeshu Bhakti movement, and evangelized through writing his blog, poetry, books, articles, and autobiography. However, even his writing drew from or contained some of the elements or forms of orality; for example, he kept track of the questions bhaktas asked him after satsangs and wrote a book answering many of those questions, engaging with them in a Socratic style.

As Swamiji began learning about Bible storying, he began to use Bible stories to answer these questions. Swamiji became an excellent Bible storyteller. He co-taught with me in several storying trainings. He appreciated that the stories of the Bible could answer many of the questions he so regularly received. The stories from Mark 4-5 seemed particularly helpful. Those stories seemed to answer the majority of the questions he received. The story of Jesus calming the storm spoke to Jesus' power over the physical realm; the story of Jesus healing the demoniac spoke to Jesus' power over the spiritual realm; the story of healing the woman with the issue of blood spoke to Jesus' power over disease; and the story of Jesus healing Jairus' daughter spoke to Jesus' powers over death. Swamiji became a believer in the surgical use of biblical stories to answer everyday questions; however, I was determined to convince him that he should be telling biblical stories systematically, i.e. chronologically, in a way that gave his disciples an understanding of the metanarrative of Scripture.

To that end, Tricia and I invited Swamiji to travel to our house in Bengaluru to perform a special birthday puja for her. Swamiji came to live with us for several days. All of our neighbours were Hindus. They were thrilled that we had a swami staying with us. They were even more thrilled when we invited them to the birthday puja. Swamiji directed us in preparing our home for the event. We removed all the furniture from our living room and left only rugs and floor pillows along with a stand upon which he could sit his Bible. For our Hindu friends, it was very disrespectful to sit upon chairs and leave the holy book on the floor during a worship service.

Instead, we sat on the floor, while the holy book was placed above the floor. On a small tray at the front of the room we arranged oil lamps, flowers, and incense. We hung garlands of marigold and jasmine above our front door and drew a colourful mandela design on our concrete driveway. As our neighbours and friends arrived, they respectfully greeted Swamiji by touching his feet, and sat on the rugs in the living room. Swamiji lit the oil lamps, explaining how Yeshu is the light of the world. He lit the incense, explaining how our prayers to Yeshu are like incense. Then he led us in a series of bhajans, clanging tiny cymbals to keep time, and occasionally stopping to reflect upon the theological truth in the bhajan.

As a part of the puja, my wife and I were to speak. My wife as the person having the birthday was invited to tell her story. She gave the testimony of her faith journey with Christ. As her husband, I was invited to speak on behalf of her family. I told a fifteen-minute metanarrative of Scripture from the creation of the world to the ascension of the resurrected Jesus. The birthday puja was well-received and had a significant impact on our neighbours. They spoke of the puja for years to come. Later that evening as we were having dinner, I asked Swamiji what he thought of the theological impact the metanarrative story could have on Hindus. He explained to me that he did indeed want to use the metanarrative of Scripture, but that I had followed the wrong theme for the Hindu

culture. I had discussed broken and restored relationship through Creation, Fall, Abraham, David, Isaiah, and Jesus. Swamiji suggested a different redemptive theme for the metanarrative that might have more impact on the majority of Hindus he knew. He said, 'Every Hindu I know worships heroes. Their gods are heroes, their gurus are heroes, their politicians are heroes. The Jesus you missionaries present is kind and loving. That is good, but Jesus also needs to be the hero'. Swamiji convinced me to craft a story from Revelation as a call to decision for a Hindu audience. That one story changed the trajectory of our ministry. We saw many more decisions and churches planted among Hindus as a result (Stringer 2009).

This story about Swami Muktanand is not an apologetic for the kind of Hindu contextualization practiced by Swami Muktanand and others. I do not agree with all aspects of the Yeshu Bhakti movement. Nor is this vignette an exemplar of what I believe oral theology should look like. However, Swamiji's theologizing is a clear example of a core characteristic of oral theology and the theme of this chapter, embodied theology. Swamiji's theology is embodied physically, culturally, communally, and experientially. Swamiji, and the wider Yeshu Bhakti movement, emphasized and used embodied forms of theology. They used ritual and liturgical forms that emphasized full-body engagement with theological concepts. Take incense, for example: whenever Swamiji lit a stick of incense during a puja, he explained that incense represents the prayers of God's people and expounded on the importance of prayer in a Christian's life. As participants smelled the incense, they internalized the core theological message. But on a deeper level, especially as Swamiji began incorporating storytelling into his theologizing, the embodied nature of his theologizing was rooted in Scripture.

5.3   Orality and Embodiment

Orality is marked by embodiment and embodied cognition. In the sections below, I will first describe what I mean by cognition then embodied cognition. I will explicate three modes of embodied cognition: physical embodiment, grounded embodiment, and cultural embodiment. I will then discuss oral embodied cognition using these three categories.

5.3.1   Cognition

Cognition has a broad and multivalent meaning depending upon the discipline in which the term is used. Cognition is most associated with mental processes of perception, reasoning, evaluating, learning, and remembering. These processes pertain to the way in which people interact with the world in order to gain knowledge about it and from it (Gazzaniga and Reuter-Lorenz 2010:14). These processes are particularly important when considering theological thought and development. However, theology has tended toward a Kantian approach to cognition that assumes that all manner of reason stems from the same universal mental categories. This is not only untrue regarding cognition and reason in general, but also particularly unhelpful regarding oral reason and cognition which is socially and physically embodied.

5.3.2   Embodied Cognition

Embodied cognition emphasizes the body and environment in the process of cognition. For the purposes of this project, we will consider three forms of embodied cognition: (1) cognition involving the body itself; (2) cognition grounded in the real-world, both physical and lived experience; (3) cognition situated within a culture and relational network.

Cognitive scientists who adhere to the concept of embodied cognition emphasize the role of the physical body in cognition. The body interacts with one's environment in such a way that the neural network is able perceive, think, speak, and act (Shapiro

2011:170). The physical body and the senses form a pre-knowledge which lead to understanding, and that understanding leads to knowledge.

The physical body exists in a physical world. People relate to this world and perceive the world before they experience knowledge or before they reason. In this way cognition is grounded in real-world experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962:ix). The interactions and lived experiences in that world enables cognition. The human being is placed in the world and as a being in the world one is always already submerged in meaning even before meaning can be interpreted from the senses (Heidegger 1962b:207). In fact, it is through one's relation to the real world and to others that one knows oneself (Merleau-Ponty 1962:383).

Embodied cognition is not only about cognition through the physical body but also through interaction with the physical environment and others. This also means that embodied cognition is embodied through lived experiences with others (Varela et al. 2000:loc. 1120). If this is the case then, embodied cognition is situated within a culture and social network. People make sense of themselves and others through their social interactions. These interactions are guided by social schemata that ultimately guide cognition (Fiske and Taylor 1984:180). Cognition is culturally situated. In fact, culture permeates all of cognition to the point that one cannot untwine culture from cognition (Hutto et al. 2020:15).

Embodied cognition is thus "bodied" cognition in the real world within a specific socio-cultural milieu. In the following section, I will discuss how oral learners tend toward embodied cognition using these three categories.

5.3.3   Orality and Embodied Cognition.

Embodiment is a core characteristic of orality. When most orality practitioners refer to embodied epistemology or embodied cognition among oral people, they are generally referring to the type of embodiment that aids cognition through the physical body.

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However, as we have seen above, there are multiple modes of embodiment. Considering these modes of embodiment will move cognition in orality studies beyond descriptors such as "concrete thinking". Such terms have been used to describe oral characteristics in negative binaries. In other words, descriptors such as "concrete thinking" were often used to explain that oral people were incapable of abstraction or reason. It is an unfortunate legacy in orality studies that orality has so often been described as not literate or atheoretical whereas considering these attributes of embodiment in a positive light not only elevates oral cognition, but it also allows us to see that oral embodiment tracks along with new discoveries in hermeneutics, psychology, and theology alike. Likewise, the theatrical turn in theology has in part come about as a recognition of moving beyond abstraction and theory in theology to one that is more embodied and performed. Before moving on to theological implications, we will discuss the forms of embodied cognition in oral culture.

5.3.3.1 Oral Cognition is "Bodied" Cognition

Perhaps the first person to associate orality with embodied cognition was the Jesuit priest and anthropologist Marcel Jousse. Jousse described oral people as 'verbo-moteurs' (Jousse 1925:24). He suggested that among oral people the physical body and gestures played a significant role in cognition and language. The body and physical actions of the body not only make meaning but provide significant functions for memory. Language and body work together to understand and remember. Jousse described this oral style according to the laws of his *anthropologie du geste* (Jousse 2008).

The first law is *rythmo-mimisme*, that of rhythm and mimicry. Human beings perceive, understand, act, and re-enact according to their lived corporeal experiences. This mimicry must happen in a certain sequence in order to aid in memory, thus there must be a rhythm to it. The second law also illustrates the centrality of the body in cognition and language for oral people. Jousse termed this *bilateralisme*. Jousse

postulated that oral people must use their body to express themselves. As their physical bodies were bilateral: up and down, left and right, back and forth, so too was their language and cognition. In other words, oral people tend towards balance and equilibrium in their thought and speech. So, parallelism, repetition, and analogy are characteristic of oral cognition and communication. The third law of oral style was *formulisme*. For Jousse, the body tends towards a habit of gesture. In this way the body remembers. The oral style follows this formulaic performance to aid in memory and recall.

> In the oral style, stereotyped formulas adapt flexibly to a concrete reality, as the traditional formulas can be juxtaposed in new, more or less original combinations, although these will always accord with the physical laws of the body from which they arose (Sienaert 1990:97).

Fellow Jesuit priest, Walter Ong, built upon Jousse's understanding of the importance of the body in oral cognition in his Terry Lectures at Yale in 1964. Ong describes the interaction between body and the world as the *sensorium* (Ong 1967:1–12). In trying to argue for an embodied approach to theological reflection upon the word of God, Ong privileges sound among the sensorium, the physical senses. He attempts to express the importance of sound and hearing in an oral-aural context. Unfortunately, he does so to the detriment of other embodied means of cognition, to the rest of the sensorium.

In defence of Ong, Huisman argued in his doctoral dissertation that a recovery of the entire sensorium mentioned throughout Ong's work might lead to a fuller understanding of Ong's 'noetic economy' (Huisman 2011:109–20). Huisman's understanding of noetic economy is the system in which knowledge is gained. Ong's instance on the immediacy and presence of spoken word in orality roots the oral noetic economy in the body and its sensory-motor systems. The body interacts not only with itself, but it tries to make sense of the world around it. The real-world context of the body aids in interpretation. Oral cognition is highly context dependent. This approach to oral language and cognition highlights the importance of context and situatedness. Oral

language and cognition are deeply rooted not only in the physical body but also in embodied experience.

5.3.3.2   Oral Cognition is Grounded in the Real World

Embodied experience in the real world, although often overlooked in orality studies in favour of spoken and cultural embodiment, is a core element of oral cognition. Learning takes place with interaction with the real world. This type of learning takes the form of experience, participation, and apprenticeship as forms of grounded embodiment. Oral societies achieve a high degree of knowledge, learning, and reasoning through grounded experience without the necessity of using text (Fanta-Vagenshtein and Chen 2009).

In his 'psychodynamics of orality', Ong describes this type of embodiment as concrete or situated (Ong 2012:48). Ong placed this type of grounded embodiment in contrast with the abstract categorization afforded by literacy. The real-world embodiment of knowledge and reason for oral people underwent significant change when they were introduced to the interiority of writing. In other words, literacy rewires the brain's cognitive function towards interiority and abstract reasoning rather than concrete interaction with the environment and community. 'Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld' (Ong 2012:48–9). To illustrate this concrete mode of cognition Ong cites the fieldwork of soviet psychologist Alexandr Luria (Ong 2012:49–54). Luria tested a range of oral and literate people in rural Uzbekistan. He found that the more oral the respondents were, they tended to relay answers that were more connected to the real world than the more literate respondents. For example, oral respondents tended to identify geometric figures with a name of a real-world object, e.g. when presented with a circle they would call it a ball or a plate. On the other hand, the more literate respondents identified the figures using abstract geometric categories, circle, square, triangle (Luria 1976b:32–9). Ong goes on to cite numerous Lurian examples in

his effort to argue that literacy rewires the brain. Ong's assertions may in fact be true (Wolf and Stoodley 2008:217). However, Ong's insistence on uncovering the technological determinism of writing on cognition overshadowed the key point: oral cultures tend towards embodied cognition grounded in the real world.

Goody also argued that writing reconfigures modes of cognition. His technological determinism also overshadowed one of his keys discoveries among the LoDagaa of Northern Ghana, the exteriority of modes of learning among oral cultures (Goody 1987b:157). Goody describes three modes of knowing among the LoDagaa which he also describes as being widespread among oral societies: (1) participation and experience; (2) ritual; (3) spiritual or mystic (Goody 1987b:156–7). The first two forms of learning are highly embodied. All three of these modes of learning are exterior to the person as opposed to the interiority of learning that comes from writing. Goody goes on to decry the role of writing as subverting and devaluing oral modes of knowing and in so doing devaluing and controlling oral cultures.

How might oral modes of embodied cognition find value and honour? Missionary educator Lynn Thigpen suggests a participatory mode of teaching and learning that unites and reinforces embodied modes of learning (Thigpen 2016). Thigpen conducted research among adults with limited formal education (ALFE) in Cambodia. Thigpen's primary conclusion is that the core of oral learning, or as Thigpen prefers—ALFE learning, is connection (Thigpen 2016:162–3). By connection, Thigpen tends toward human relationships that provide connections. She focuses on the relational priority of orality, as I do in chapter four. She describes connected learning as apprenticeship, mimicry, and just-in-time training. Although I agree with the human connectedness this approach to learning exhibits, Thigpen overlooks the critical connection to the real-world. The critical components she describes in relational connected learning, phronesis and apprenticeship,

are also grounded in real-world lived experience. Oral embodied cognition is connected both experientially and socially.

5.3.3.3 Oral Embodied Cognition is Culturally Situated

Oral cognition is embodied in that it is related to the real world. The real world consists not only of a human's bodily interacting with the physical world through lived experience, but it also consists of human relationships and social networks. Subsequently, people are socially embodied. In chapter four, I discussed the essential nature of community to oral cultures. In oral cultures where oral discourse is the primary mode of learning, knowing, and reasoning, the worldview of that culture has a greater impact on cognition than on those cultures that rely on text. Worldview can be described as the means through which a particular group of people interpret the world (Geertz and Darnton 2017:89). Worldview is a collection of fundamental assumptions whether explicit or implicit that defines and interprets reality (Sire 2020:16). These assumptions provide the foundation for perceiving, decision-making, reasoning, and learning, i.e. cognition. Culture provides the modes of symbolizing and expressing worldview in order to make sense of the world (Geertz and Darnton 2017:89). This collective interpretive grid forms and informs social cognition.

In his doctoral research on participatory learning among oral people in Nigeria, orality scholar Charles Madinger argues that culture is the central factor in oral cognition and communication (Madinger 2022:63–71). Construction of new knowledge among oral learners must be developed within their cultural milieu since cognition 'evolves through collectively receiving and processing new information that could challenge the worldview status quo' (Madinger 2022:71). In his article exploring his seven dimensions of orality, Madinger places culture first (Madinger 2010:205). For Madinger, culture is the invisible key which unlocks understanding. Oral cognition is embodied in its cultural context.

Oral cognition is embodied physically, embodied in the real-world experience, and embodied in a particular context. If oral cognition is embodied, then it would stand to reason that oral theologizing should be embodied. In the next section I will explore how Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach might provide a framework for an embodied approach to theologizing.

5.4 Vanhoozer's Canonical-linguistic Theology and Embodied Theologizing

In chapter two, I discussed drama and theo-drama as a better category for oral theologizing than story or narrative. The drama, after all, is the story embodied. In this chapter, I explore more fully the concept of embodiment in theologizing. At first glance, one might ask how the theatrical model might frame embodiment outside of the clear metaphor of Christians acting out the theo-drama on the world's stage. Vanhoozer's description of the sapiential nature of the canonical-linguistic approach to theology is essentially an embodied approach. Theology is not simply about adhering to a system of propositional truths. Theology is about right living in this time and this place. Sapiential theology is the embodiment of practical reason. Vanhoozer presents three categories of sapiential theology: prosaic theology, phronetic theology, and prophetic theology (Vanhoozer 2005:309). I will argue later that at least two of these three categories, prosaic theology and phronetic theology roughly parallel those of oral embodiment grounded in the real world and situated in a specific culture. I will also argue the third form of oral embodiment might be of service to Vahoozer's prophetic theology, but for the moment, I will discuss the three sapiential categories in more detail.

5.4.1 Prosaic Theology

Vanhoozer's approach to theology is prosaic in that it attends to the practices of ordinary language and ordinary life (Vanhoozer 2005:310). Theology is about developing habits of speaking and acting according to Scripture in everyday life. At first glance, one might

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think that this form of embodiment maps onto the oral embodied cognition grounded in everyday life; however, Vanhoozer goes on to explain that the 'challenge of prosaic theology is to move from the prose of Scripture to the prose of contemporary culture' (Vanhoozer 2005:310). Prosaic theology is then a practice in contextualizing the theo-drama in multiple contexts. Thus, the prosaic theology of the canonical-linguistic approach is more akin to culturally situated oral embodied cognition.

Vanhoozer's approach to doctrine is that it gives direction for right belief as well as right behaviour. Prosaic theology asserts that this right behaviour should be contextualized to the particular situation and context while remaining faithful to the canonical text. Scripture, although translated into various cultural linguistic contexts is transcultural, i.e. Scripture addresses every culture.

> …what is of transcultural significance is the overarching theo-drama, the message of what God is doing in Christ for the sake of the whole world; the subject matter of Scripture bears interest and relevance to people in every culture and for this reason is transcultural (Vanhoozer 2005:314).

Contextual embodiment for Vanhoozer is the faithful performance of the theo-drama in a particular socio-cultural and historical context. This performance must be appropriate to the given context while being governed by the theo-drama as depicted in the biblical canon. The communicative action of Scripture becomes the paradigm for faithful performance of the theo-drama in different contexts. Vanhoozer delineates two principles for appropriate contextualization. First is the canonical principle. Scripture is the authority for all contextual forms of Christianity. As Christianity has been contextualized throughout history and in various places, Scripture has been translated into the vernacular of that time and place. All translation of Scripture is an exercise in interpretation. That interpretation of the authoritative message of Scripture is guided by the tradition formed by the various attempts at contextualization over time. This is the catholic principle.

Given the centrality of Scripture in contextualization of Christian doctrine, Vanhoozer turns to the concept of translation as contextualization. Prosaic theology uses

ordinary language. When Scripture is brought to a new linguistic and cultural context, the text must be translated in understandable vernacular language. Translation in the framework of prosaic theology is necessarily idiomatic and preferences the cultural and linguistic milieu of the receptor as opposed to that of the interpreter. Here Vanhoozer exposes a weakness of his approach to contextualization as translation. He views the interpreter, theologian, translator as a Westerner (Vanhoozer 2005:323). This view has been largely abandoned in the fields of translation and missiology. The standard for translation is a local translator translating into their heart language. The theologian is the local person doing local theology. This is the true essence of a prosaic theology. [29]

For Vanhoozer, a prosaic theology is a theology that is governed by the authority of the biblical canon and guided by the wisdom of the ongoing catholic tradition of contextualized faithful performances of the theo-drama. This faithful contextualization is ultimately a work of the Spirit that both guides and connects Christians throughout space and time. No one contextualized form of the 'Tradition' in the form of local 'traditions' is privileged above another. This means that no one form of systematizing, interpreting, teaching, or even embodying theology takes pride of place save that of the original theo-drama, the triune God in communicative action. Our participation in the theo-drama requires moving from understanding the theo-drama from the canon to embodying the theo-drama within a particular sociocultural context, and then living accordingly in the real world. The context of the real world does not always perfectly mirror that of Scripture. As such, Christians within a particular cultural milieu must make wise decisions according to their understanding of the truth of Scripture.

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[29] There are of course roles for non-local people, particularly in those places without a long tradition of Christian theology. The section on oral theology and cultural embodiment will explore these roles further.

5.4.2 Phronetic Theology

In order to live out the theo-drama fittingly, one must make wise decisions. These decisions must fit not only with Scripture but also with a particular real-life situation. Theology is embodied through judgements on how to live fittingly within a particular context according to the theo-drama. Theology then becomes an exercise in faithful improvisation of the theo-drama as revealed in Scripture. Vanhoozer calls this phronetic theology. I suggest that this phronetic theology parallels embodied theology which is grounded in the real world as discussed above.

5.4.2.1 Phronesis

Vanhoozer uses Aristotle's conception of *phronesis*, practical reason, as the starting point for his discussion on phronetic theology. The concept of *phronesis* is Vanhoozer's middle way between seemingly competing epistemological approaches to rationality taken by theologians and biblical scholars. The theologian has often concerned himself with *theoria*, theoretical knowledge, and the biblical scholar concerned himself with *technē*, technical skills. So, the outcome of theology has often been abstract theory while the outcome of biblical studies has been biblical criticism. Given that theology is concerned with how to speak and act in the real world, Vanhoozer calls for a third form of rationality, *phronesis*, which is concerned about making right judgements about how to live and act in the real world for the good. However, this sort of *phronesis* involves not only understanding what human beings are to do on this world, it also illuminates how the triune God has acted in this world; has communicated those actions in this world; and how the Spirit continues to guide action in this world. Vanhoozer therefore seeks to adjust the Aristotelian use of *phronesis* to develop his own theo-dramatic *phronesis*. Aristotle was concerned with ethics, making right, virtuous, judgements in particular situations which have as a goal the good life. Vanhoozer further defines the good life as what is means to live "in Christ." Vanhoozer also points out that Gadamer advances the concept

of *phronesis* by applying it to hermeneutics. All interpretation happens in a particular sociocultural and spatiotemporal context. The interpretation of a text also happens on a specific occasion for a specific situation. All of these elements play a role in interpretation. In Gadamerian hermeneutics, the interpreter of a text must apply his understanding of the text to that situation within that particular context. This act of application of the text is itself an act of interpreting the text. When it comes to the biblical text, Gadamer is careful to point out that the meaning of the text itself is not changed with application. It is simply "concretized," in other words, embodied in the real world. When this embodiment occurs, no new meaning is created, only increased understanding in much the same way as discussed in chapter four that new "traditions" add to the "tradition" which increases our understanding of the "Tradition."

Vanhoozer wishes to specify a certain type of *phronesis* for theologizing, theo-dramatic *phronesis*. Vanhoozer distinguished theo-dramatic phronesis from Aristotelian ethics and Gadamerian hermeneutics in three ways. First, theo-dramatic *phronesis* concerns itself with three theo-dramatic goods: (1) the *salus* of the individual; (2) the *shalom* of the community; and (3) the glorification of the *shema*, or name of God (Vanhoozer 2005:329). Second, Gadamer recognizes that hermeneutics is a dialog between author and audience. Retrieving meaning is increasingly difficult as the sociocultural and spatiotemporal distance increases. Gadamer calls the area of understanding (and one might assume the phronetic judgements that follow) that occurs a result of a fusion of two horizons. Theo-dramatic *phronesis* has the advantage over this conundrum. The indwelling of the Spirit allows for a more complete fusion of human and divine horizons. The fallen nature of man and disconnection created by sin of course prevents permanent and complete overlaps of understanding, but it does make understanding possible in the first place. The Spirit spans space and time. The Spirit enables God's communicative action through his word. Theo-dramatic *phronesis* is Spirit

enabled judgement. The third way in which Vanhoozer distinguishes theo-dramatic *phronesis* is in the locus of hermeneutical authority. Theo-dramatic *phronesis* in canonical-linguistic theology places authority in the biblical canon. As such theodramatic *phronesis* is acting fittingly according to the Scripture.

> Good theological judgement is largely, though not exclusively, a matter of being apprenticed to the canon: of having one's capacity for judging (a capacity that involves imagination, reason, emotion, and volition alike) formed and transformed by the ensemble of canonical practices that constitute Scripture (Vanhoozer 2005:331).

Theo-dramatic *phronesis* requires a perception of particularity and a perspective of the playwright. In a particular situation the theologian with the phronetic virtue of perception will assess and recognize all the relevant theological issues at play. In order to make proper judgments, however, the theologian must do so from the perspective of the playwright. In other words, the theological judgements must be made in light of the whole theo-drama. To make theo-dramatic judgement is to act and speak fittingly to the canon of Scripture. The canon of Scripture is the ultimate authority for speech and action. However, the Scripture does not speak about every specific situation in which one might find oneself. This theo-dramatic *phronesis* is not a matter of following a set of universal laws nor is it a matter of re-enacting Scripture as a script. It is a matter of faithful improvisation in the Spirit.

5.4.2.2 Improvisation

Vanhoozer suggests that deployment of theo-dramatic *phronesis* is best described as theatrical improvisation. Theatrical improvisation is not the extemporaneous anything-goes approach to acting that many believe it is. Improvisation is a ruled approach to acting within a particular story with a group of actors who are following the same storyline. Improvisation requires an understanding of the storyline, a discipline to adhere to the rules set out by the story, and a disposition to make creative choices in line with the developing action. The improvisers work together following a structure. So, the goal of

the improviser is to accept the offers of the other actors in building the play. In order for this to work, the actors must act in ways that are obvious and in keeping with the character of the play.

Theo-dramatic improvisation is a matter of acting in accordance with the theo-drama. Creative decisions are made in groups, but these decisions must be in alignment with the "play", or the theo-drama as presented in the canon of Scripture. The Spirit leads the improviser to understand and act fittingly according to the script of the theo-drama. Elsewhere I have discussed Vanhoozer's change in perspective regarding Scripture as the script for theologizing. However, in the case of improvisation it seems appropriate to regard Scripture as the script of the theo-drama which is being improvised upon. As theo-dramatic improvisation happens in particular times and in particular situations. The scripted theo-drama provides the story to which the improvisers must be faithful. Vanhoozer proposes that the theo-drama itself is God's improvisation along a theme of covenant which adjusts according to the response of humanity.

> Theology is thus a matter not only of thinking God's thoughts after him but of improvising God's improvisations after him. Indeed, every attempt to render Christianity playable today involves improvising the canonical-linguistic action in new cultural-linguistic contexts. Perhaps the Christian theologian can be responsible both to the action of the drama (whose principal acts have now been scripted) and to the present situation *only* as a faithful improviser (Vanhoozer 2005:344).

In order to be a faithful improvisor, the theologian must be able to discern the pattern of judgements that exist in the biblical canon. If God is continually improvising in the canon, then he is making phronetic judgements. As theologians discern God's pattern of judgement, then they can render the same judgments in different times and different contexts. This sameness is theo-dramatic sameness, not literal sameness. Vanhoozer asserts that the authority of Scripture lies in canonical judgements rather than conceptualities and vocabularies (Vanhoozer 2005:344). If this is the case, then faithful performance is creatively acting in the real-world situations with the same judgements found in Scripture. This is improvising with canon-sense. The biblical canon, as script,

gives the original play along with the original judgements that can be improvised throughout history in various cultures and places while remaining faithful to the original script, not by slavishly adhering the words or the concepts of the original script, but by making the same judgements that are patterned in the original. Following these canonical patterns of judgement is faithful improvisation in phronetic theology. Phronetic theology is concerned not just with practical wisdom but also understanding judgements in a particular canonical context and how to embody the same judgement in different situations and cultural contexts. The phronetic theologian acts in ways that are faithful to the theo-drama.

5.4.3   Prophetic Theology

If phronetic theology seeks to faithfully improvise the canonical script by making right judgments, then it is making a claim about what is right and what is truth. Sapiential theology, then, is not only prosaic and phronetic, but it is also prophetic. Prophetic theology claims to speak for and about God. As such, it claims that God's word is true and must be kept. Phronetic theology seeks to determine patterns of right judgment throughout the theo-drama and improvise in particular situations using the same judgement, but not necessarily the same words or actions. Prophetic theology states that the same judgement must be made no matter what the situation is.

Vanhoozer explores prophetic theology in two modes: protestation and attestation. Theological protestation resists cultural assimilation that is not in alignment with the theo-drama. Although canonical linguistic theology is prosaic in that it is contextualized, it is prophetic in that it protests against any contextualization that moves beyond the sameness of judgement displayed in the theo-drama. Prophetic culture does not ascribe to Lindbeckian cultural-linguistic patterns in which the culture provides the grammar for correct theologizing. It is canonical-linguistic, giving the canon of Scripture ultimate

authority over right living and right action. When the church moves away from this understanding of authority, prophetic theology protests and holds it accountable.

Prophetic theology not only protests, but it also attests to the resurrection life. Prophetic theology seeks to develop disciples who live in the fullness of living in Christ. Disciples are to be witnesses to the resurrected Christ. As "little Christs" the Christian disciple lives out the truth of the gospel. As "little Christs" the Christian disciple participates in the proclamation of the Gospel. Prophetic theology encourages the disciple to embody the gospel in word and deed.

5.5   Oral Embodied Theology

Oral cognition: perceiving, learning, understanding, decision making, and memory is embodied. Earlier, I examined three modes of oral embodied cognition: physical embodiment, grounded embodiment, and cultural embodiment. I then suggested that Vanhoozer's sapiential theology was essentially an embodied theology. In the following sections I will explore an oral embodied theology using Vanhoozer's framework for sapiential theology: prosaic theology which I parallel with cultural embodiment; phronetic theology which I parallel with embodiment grounded in the real world and experience; and prophetic theology into whose service I place physical embodiment in the form of ritual and worship.

5.5.1   Oral Prosaic Theology

Swami Muktanand chose a prosaic theology when he began ministry among Hindus in India. He chose to use the everyday language of the people. He chose everyday symbols, ritual, and worship of Hindu culture. He had to make decisions about what portions of Hindu worship could be redeemed as a contextualized theology. He incarnated himself as a Hindu who followed Christ exclusively. Swami Muktanand chose to become a man to whom a Hindu would listen about spiritual things. He located himself in a place where

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spiritual people were seeking spiritual answers, the holy city of Varanasi. He translated the truth of Christ into Hindu culture without changing the essence of the gospel. Swami Muktanand's theology was culturally embodied.

An oral theology must situate in the culture and worldview of the context in which it is found. Translating the biblical text into language that is understood without engaging with that text within the worldview and epistemology of that culture is a job half-done. Unfortunately, there is a new trend in the orality movement focused on oral Bible translation (OBT) which is expressly a means of translating Scripture using oral-aural methods in an attempt to get the most natural recorded text of Scripture possible. This is a laudable effort of which I take part. Unfortunately, many OBT practitioners focus so much on getting the style and rhythm of local language that they forget to consider that the text was originally intended for an audience separated by millennia and situated in a completely different cultural context. The translation task is a theological task. In order for oral translation to be done in alignment with oral theology, the local church must engage with Scripture and the translation task with a culturally embodied, contextualized theology.

Michael Rynkiewich argues that churches must be self-theologizing in order to be truly independent (Rynkiewich 2007). In order for churches to become self-theologizing, they must draw from a hermeneutics that reflects their local cultural contexts. Rynkiewich distinguishes such contextualized hermeneutics from contextualization, explaining that while contextualization involves finding culturally appropriate ways to evangelize and disciple, contextual hermeneutics involves searching for meaning within the 'larger context of life'. Different contexts, therefore, must require and develop different hermeneutics in conversation with both Scripture and the global church. But what do different contextual hermeneutics look like? As a starting point, Rynkiewich suggests

considering four continuums that affect hermeneutical principles: orality to literacy, colonized to colonizer, culture to cultures, and community to individual.

Within the continuum of orality and literacy, Rynkiewich argues that oral hermeneutical principles must necessarily be embodied. Since oral learners require both the body and the mind in the act of remembering, an oral hermeneutics must also require both the body and the mind in its search for meaning. Since oral learners are intensely communal, that search for meaning 'involves not only the body but the social body as well' (Rynkiewich 2007:50). Thus, recognizing the centrality of embodied culture and learning is key to oral theologizing.

Another theologian focused on culturally embodied oral theology was Jay Moon. Moon draws from twelve years of qualitative research to describe how oral Builsa communities in Ghana have used the oral medium of proverbs in the process of decolonizing and contextualizing Builsa Christianity (Moon 2005). While Moon describes Builsa hermeneutical engagement with proverbs primarily as a method of contextualization, it also demonstrates an oral community addressing practical theological concerns through oral theologizing.

Builsa proverbs function as cultural symbols used to communicate cultural values and meanings. They form the bedrock of oral performance in Builsa communities. Only children speak with blunt directness; adults layer relevant proverbs into their discourse to communicate emotion and cultural values. This 'sweet talk' often becomes an oral performance and discourse. Therefore, Moon argues that proverbs are an important oral literature that serve as 'open windows' into deeper aspects of Builsa culture. Both Builsa Christians and outsiders to Builsa culture can examine Builsa values and cultural norms through proverbs.

Moon describes how this examination allows Builsa Christians to make decisions regarding the often overlooked 'excluded middle' issues they face. Moon describes how

Builsa culture sees the world in three parts: an unseen 'spiritual' world, a seen world, and a world in the middle in which spiritual forces act on the seen world. While the Builsa church, as 'high religion', addresses spiritual, otherworld issues, Builsa communities tend to rely on primal religion to address the world in the middle. This 'excluded middle' leads to a 'split-level Christianity' in which the church makes decisions regarding the unseen spiritual world, but communities tend to rely on primal religions to make decisions regarding the ways that unseen world affects the seen world.

When Builsa Christians discuss a proverb within hermeneutical and dialectical communities, they seek to determine what cultural values or norms that proverb espouses. They then measure those values against Scripture and determine what cultural values fully align with Scripture; what values need to be modified to align with Scripture; and what values should be rejected. Moon describes this process as riding a bike. As Builsa communities converse to discover what cultural values are at play in a proverb and then assess that proverb to see if those values align with Scripture values, they practice a type of communal theologizing that they can then use to address 'excluded middle' issues as they arise.

Though the process Moon describes is not one in which Scripture itself is communicated and internalized orally, it is a process in which oral performance and literature is utilized as a medium through which to address practical theological questions. The use of proverbs is contextual embodiment that looks and feels like Builsa theology while unlocking faithful performance of the theo-drama through prosaic use of proverbs.

Vanhoozer is concerned with a prosaic theology founded upon contextual theo-dramatics. Wesley Vander Lugt defines 'contextual theo-dramatics' by writing:

> Contextual theo-dramatics emphasizes that every actor and action is "somewhere" in particular cultures and places within creation. Consequently, it is essential for actors and companies in the theo-drama to

develop contextual disponibility and to craft contextual fitting performances if these performances are going to succeed somewhere or anywhere' (Vander Lugt 2014b:183).[30]

Vander Lugt also describes contextual ethics, an ethics that is neither absolutist (there are absolute ethical rules that must be followed at all times) or relative (everything depends on the specifics of a situation). Instead, contextual ethics recognizes that, much like in theology, in order to make right ethical decisions one must acknowledge both the context those decisions are made in and scriptural authority. Since ethics and theology do not occur in a vacuum, Vander Lugt argues that it is within a theo-dramatic framework that ethics and theology can best, and most concretely, engage with their context.

Vander Lugt argues that those improvising within theo-drama should examine the 'cultural scripts' of their contexts. In order to rightly situate theology within the contexts both of physical creation and culture, and in order to determine how to rightly live within those contexts, participants in theo-drama should first openly and humbly listen and seek to fully understand the contextual cultural scripts with which they engage. Instead of approaching those scripts by parsing them out into specific areas to reject or accept, theo-dramatic improvisers should practice an 'over-acceptance' of cultural scripts.

> Over-acceptance arises out of the presupposition that every cultural script is based on the legitimate desires of divine image-bearers, even though these desires are often misdirected and expressed through unfaithful performance. To over-accept, therefore, is to demonstrate through culturally inscribed and fitting performances how the church's counter script is able to fulfil and transform every cultural script (Vander Lugt 2014b:199).

In other words, over-acceptance both works within a cultural script and, by adhering closely to the counter script of the wider theo-drama, seeks to transform that cultural script into one that adheres to the counter script of the theo-drama.

Prosaic theology seeks to situate theology within particular contexts. Vander Lugt draws on Vanhoozer to describe contextual theology in theo-dramatic terms; contextual

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[30] I will discuss Vander Lugt's term "disponibility" in greater detail later in the thesis. The phrase "contextual disponibility" here refers to the actors' disposition of willingness to accept and adapt to the particular context.

theology allows participants in the theo-drama to improvise right ways of thinking and doing within both particular cultural contexts and the authority of Scripture.

5.5.2 Oral Phronetic Theology

Swami Muktanand did not simply embody Hindu culture in his theologizing, he intended his theological approach to result in right living and right action for the eternal good of his disciples. Swami Muktanand had an oral phronetic theology. Each *satsang* Swamiji performed contained within in it a question-and-answer period that focused on everyday decision making. Once Swamiji learned the power of Bible stories, he used those stories as a means of encouraging faithful performance of his disciples. These illiterate disciples would not have had a chance to read any of Swami Muktanand's books, so he engaged them with a dialogical hermeneutic using questions and Bible stories. The disciples then applied that dialog into their everyday lives. It is unlikely that they would have been able to articulate doctrinal direction for their fitting performance, but their dialog with Swamiji imparted on them the virtue of perception of their situation, and their engagement with the Bible story imparted the perspective of the playwright albeit without the benefit of the overarching metanarrative of the theo-drama. That only came later. The faithful performance in their daily lives seems to be the key to their phronetic theology. They seem not to need words to articulate the reasoning behind their performance. It is here that I agree with Samuel Wells who, while he agrees with Vanhoozer that performance allows communities to participate in and communicate with the theo-drama, Wells writes that Vanhoozer's understanding of performance is limited as it is still 'too restricted to words, and too likely to see drama as primarily a means of transmitting an inherently verbal message' (Wells 2018a:41).

Samuel Wells builds his case for theological improvisation. He argues that drama does not fully capture the dynamic nature of theology. To begin with, Wells describes the usefulness of understanding the Christian role as a performing the drama of Scripture.

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However, he criticizes performance, including Vanhoozer's notion of performance, as too limiting.

Wells goes on to outline other limitations inherent in conceptualizing Christian life as a performance of a specific script rooted in the narrative of scripture. Such a script does not always provide straightforward instructions for every issue a Christian may face; it does not necessarily draw from all of church history; it can imply that there was a 'golden era' of discipleship that should be recreated; and it may keep the Church from fully engaging with society.

Instead, Wells proposes moving beyond the performance of a script to improvisation within the theo-drama. Wells argues that improvisation encompasses the strengths of performance while allowing for a necessary flexibility and creativity in that performance. Improvisation, after all, 'is inevitable' as Christian communities are constantly improvising solutions to issues they face that may not directly correlate to Scripture.

Wells argues that a proper conception of improvisation recognizes that it follows certain rules. Within theatre, those who improvise do so after building trust with both their fellow actors and their own understanding of the rules of the drama in which they improvise. Therefore, far from seeking originality and departing from scriptural truth, improvisation takes place within the overarching Christian drama. Here, Wells draws on N. T. Wright's conception of humanity living in a five-act play, with Christians currently living in the fourth act, 'the church'. Within this fourth act, Christians draw on the narrative of the first three acts — Creation, Israel, and Jesus — while looking forward to the final act, the end. Wells argues that the Church has freedom to improvise and 'simply use the resources of the first three acts, and what they anticipate of the final act, and faithfully play with the circumstances in which they find themselves' (Wells 2018a:47).

Wells argues that such improvisation can be communal, ecclesial, and faithful to the authority of Scripture.

In her ethnography on the predominately oral Lisu church in southwest China, missionary Aminta Arrington describes how they 'have defined faith as a rhythm of shared Christian practices' (Arrington 2020:11). Arrington combines a history of the Lisu church with thick description of current church practices to outline the identity and spiritual practices of the Christian Lisu community.

Arrington uses the term "togetherness" to describe one defining practice of the Lisu Church. As a socially embedded people with little barrier between communal and individual expressions of faith, Lisu Christians practice their faith as a community — literally 'together'. Much like the Lisu join forces to work the fields together in their economic life, they join forces to practice their faith in their spiritual life. Arrington writes:

> Togetherness, for the Lisu, did not just mean that mutual support was necessary to survive. Togetherness meant that wholeness and joy were best found in being together with others… From a Christian standpoint, the strongest practices were those that could be done together, that expressed the communal life of the Body of Christ: gathering together to practice line dancing, attending church, singing in four-part harmony, and participating in intercessory prayer meetings. (Arrington 2020:147)

This everyday togetherness provides the Lisu a type of improvisational oral theologizing. As they transform spiritual knowledge into daily communal action, the Lisu not only create a framework for consistently reflecting on theological truths but also provide a strong basis for improvising theology.

This is evidenced in the "Two Leg Theology" espoused by the Lisu theologian Ma-pa Timothy. Throughout her research, people told Arrington stories of when they 'stopped believing' Christians during certain times, such as years of communist rule. Later, the same people returned to the faith, once again describing themselves as believers. Perplexed, Arrington asked theologian Ma-pa Timothy how someone could so easily stop and start believing in Jesus since she considered belief primarily an internal and individual

choice. Timothy responded, 'If you have belief, it has to show itself. . . If there's no expression, there's no belief' (Arrington 2020:149). Timothy went on to explain that much like humans need two legs to walk, Christians need both behaviour and belief, both external manifestations and internal faith, to truly believe. Echoing the epistle of James, the Lisu church has developed a theology of belief that understands the symbiotic relationship between external works and internal faith.

Oral theology is phronetic theology that requires both right judgement and improvisation. Oral theology is concerned with the everyday Christian life resulting in faithful performance in word and deed. In oral theology, the word may or may not be fully articulated. The deeds are the faithful judgments according to the theo-drama and faithful performances of the theo-drama. Oral theology does not rest on propositional truth statements distilled from the Scriptural texts.

> Scripture governs theology not by providing the field from which we harvest abstract universals but *by embodying truths of transcultural significance in particular contexts* (Vanhoozer 2005:348).

Oral theology is about doing theology. Many oral people have begged me to just tell them what to do rather than what to believe. This may give pause to theologians from a reformed tradition, but I think it illustrates just how intertwined belief and practice are in oral theology. This requires a theology that is grounded in the real world of experience. The question then, is what directs oral theology towards right decisions and right actions, and how can oral theology prophetically speak on behalf of God? For that we turn to prophetic theology.

5.5.3   Oral Prophetic Theology

Swami Muktanand did have a prophetic theology. As he used Hindu symbols, songs, and ritual, he imbued them with Scriptural meaning. Discussing oral theology raises a big question: How can oral theologizing assure that it is rooted in scriptural authority? Vanhoozer relies upon doctrine as the directive for ensuring that theo-dramatic

performance is fitting to the theo-drama found in the canon of Scripture. In oral theo-drama, I believe that the physical performance of Scripture and doctrine through worship and art forms such as storytelling, dance, song, proverbs, liturgy, and ritual may provide the doctrinal framing of faithful performance. The theo-drama of Scripture must be the framing narrative for all of these forms of embodiment. As such, the patterned judgements found throughout such embodiment of the theo-drama might provide doctrinal direction necessary for faithful improvisation in oral theology.

The Lisu hymns studied by Arrington offer an example of such oral theologizing. Lisu hymns, though written down and occasionally derived from Western hymns, are performed as oral literature. Arrington describes these hymns as containing 'doctrine, belief, and creed' and the performance of these hymns as a way through which 'biblical abstractions have been mediated' (Arrington 2020). Since the hymns themselves were directly derived from Scripture or composed with scriptural doctrine in mind, Arrington contends that they serve as a 'guard against heresy'. Lisu hymns, which are sung as a community daily, are a practice of 'togetherness'. They act as a catechism and constant reminder of basic theological principles.

Miriam Adeney argues that in order to fully and accurately communicate the gospel, missionaries need to utilize various methods of learning. She describes the various ways oral communities learn, highlighting recitation, narratives, symbols, song, and action. Action, in the form of apprenticeships, liturgy, and spiritual disciplines (such as meditation, prayer, and fasting), is a 'powerful teacher'. Quoting Buddhist scholar Ananda Guruge, Adeney writes that 'practice is more important than knowledge' (Adeney 2008:97). Through action, disciples embody spiritual teaching, putting into practice theology.

Sarah Beckwith argues against certain understandings of ritual that 'have severed culture from social and political relations, structure from history, and ritual itself from

theatrical practices' (Beckwith 2001). Beckwith critiques concepts of rituals that try to 'read' the ritual, as if the ritual is a script made concrete. Instead, she argues that 'ritual does not so much assert a set of monolithic beliefs as construct a series of tensions.' Rituals have a unique ability to encompass and express such tension — such as the tension between the sacred and the profane, public, and private action, just and unjust — because of their embodied nature. A ritual allows participants to embody particular stories and doctrines and map those stories and doctrines onto the physical and social space in which the ritual takes place. Instead of showcasing 'a doctrine to be transmitted', rituals allow participants to explore a 'world of significance' and thus understand the layered symbols it contains.

Shannon Craigo-Snell describes 'a performative epistemology', arguing that 'we know in performing'(Craigo-Snell 2014:25). In her mind, Christian communities act out the script set forth in Scripture, acting in ways that create the events for which the script calls. She acknowledges that acting out a 'script' feels unnatural since we do not appear to be acting in our daily lives but argues that the narrative of Scripture informs and shapes the lives of Christians, and that it is through that performance of Scripture that Christians in turn interpret and understand Scripture. Craigo-Snell acknowledges Wells' critique of viewing discipleship as performance but argues that his critique stems from viewing performance as the 're-enacting of a set script'. Her view of performance, she argues, understands that Christian communities do not re-enact specific Scriptural scripts, but rather that those communities act out the purposes of a script within the confines of that script. She points out that Wells clearly delineates between formation and dilemma, and therein lies the difference between Wells' improvisation and Craigo-Snell's performance. She sees her conception of performance as one in which the script is constantly interpreted during the rehearsal and performance of the play.

Craigo-Snell also offers two critiques of Vanhoozer's conception of performance. First, she describes the relationship between the script and action, or rendering, within Vanhoozer's understanding of performance as one in which the text of scripture has a meaning 'as used by God' that the Church must interpret and then render in their performance. Craigo-Snell, on the other hand, sees the performance itself as an act of interpretation, arguing that 'the Bible itself commands performance and that the fullness of the meaning of the text resides within the ongoing, complex, performative interactions between Scripture and Christian communities'(Craigo-Snell 2014:34). This view of performance 'helps emphasize that when we are performing Scripture in worship and ritual, we are also performing ourselves as Christians, and performatively shaping ourselves as Christians'.

An oral theology would align with Craigo-Snell's understanding. Communal performance is, in itself, an act of interpretation. Piet Naudé described oral theology through his study of the hymnody of the Zionist Christian church in South Africa. He posited that oral doctrine is found in the communal performance of their hymns. Creedal formulations develop from this oral base (Naudé 1995:42–47). Oral embodied theology is prophetic theology when it is embodied and performed in the worship, liturgy, symbols, and sayings embedded in the oral communicative milieu in which it is found.

5.6   Conclusion

In Jay Moon's description of Builsa churches, he describes hermeneutical communities using oral literature as a medium through which to understand their own culture and address 'excluded middle' issues within it. Lisu churches use hymns in order to ground their lived theology in Scripture. The use of bhajans and Hindu liturgy by Swami Muktanand, and other Yeshu Bhakti swamis, encompasses both the contextualization of Builsa examinations of proverbs and the scriptural grounding of Lisu hymns. The rich

symbolism and oral format of bhajans contextualizes the doctrinal truths within the bhajans' content, and the content itself serves as a shorthand to remember scriptural truths. Thus, bhajans create a framework from which a swami can improvise and theologize. The hymns of the Zionist church in South Africa serve as their doctrinal guides. Perhaps a better saying in oral theology is, 'If you want to teach my people *doctrine*, teach them to sing!'

Oral theology must be embodied through culture, practice, and worship. Vanhoozer's categories of sapiential theology — prosaic theology, phronetic theology, and prophetic theology parallels the dimensions of embodied oral cognition — cognition, which is embodied through the physical body, embodied through being grounded in the real-world, and embodied through the culture of the community. These dimensions of oral cognition move theology out of the textbook and into the lives of disciples. Oral theology seeks not only knowledge but seeks wisdom which is embodied knowledge. With that wisdom oral theology becomes faith seeking performative understanding which leads to fitting participation in the theo-drama. The next chapter will explore how doctrine guides that fitting participation.

Chapter 6: Oral Theology and Doctrine

6.1   Introduction

Oral theology is embodied theology in which the ecclesial performance of theology is prosaic, phronetic, and prophetic. The ultimate authority for oral theology is the biblical canon. The canon is understood and performed in community. This chapter will address how oral doctrine might provide direction for correct interpretation and application of Scripture.

Ninian Smart succinctly describes doctrine as 'the way Christian identity has been formulated and understood'(Smart 1979:285). He elaborates by describing five functions of doctrine: credal, which refers to how doctrine defines the beliefs which define Christian communities; synthetic, which refers to how doctrine combines direct revelation with faith traditions; hermeneutic, which refers to doctrine's role in the interpretation of scripture; coherence, which refers to how doctrine unifies tensions within the faith; and finally, transcendence, which refers to how doctrine transcends the binary between 'the mythic and ethical dimensions' by pointing to the deeper truths in canonical stories. Doctrine functions as a means of making the abstract concrete without losing either the depth of the 'myths' from which it is derived or the authority of the biblical text. Unfortunately, Smart has little hope for oral doctrine:

> There are religious movements, or manifestations, where one or other dimensions is so weak as to be virtually absent: non-literate small-scale communities do not have much means of expressing the doctrinal dimension (Smart 1998:21).

I disagree with Smart. I will argue that reconceptualizing our understanding of how oral doctrine functions and expresses itself may provide a basis for oral doctrine that is both deeply rooted in biblical authority and radically formative for Christian life. To this end, Vanhoozer provides a helpful definition of doctrine in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*.

> Broadly speaking, doctrine (Lat. *doctrina*; Gk. *didaskalia*) is teaching by someone to someone about something for some purpose. Christian doctrine is teaching in accordance with the Scriptures about the gospel of Jesus Christ by the church to disciples for the purpose of knowing God and becoming wise unto salvation. Thomas Aquinas views doctrine as theology's chief product—teaching revealed by God about God. Doctrine is what, based on the Bible, the church believes and teaches—explicitly in creeds and catechisms, implicitly by its characteristic practices. (Vanhoozer 2017)

Vanhoozer's definition above expresses two dimensions of doctrine, (1) explicit teaching and (2) implicit practices. This chapter will reconceptualize oral doctrine; implicitly as "canonical habitus" and explicitly as oral expressions of canonical habitus in the form of stories, songs, proverbs, and other culturally appropriate forms. To do so, I will first describe the locus of authority in oral theologizing and propose Vanhoozer's theatrical model as a means of understanding the role of Scriptural authority in oral doctrine. I will then explore Vanhoozer's theatrical approach to doctrine, describing the role of the dramaturge as doctrinal guide and the directive role of doctrine in the *scientia* and *sapientia* of canonical-linguistic theology. This chapter will use Vanhoozer's approach as a starting point from which to develop a framework for an oral approach to doctrine. I will describe the role of the oral theologian and dramaturgical doctrinal guide, the role and function of oral doctrine in oral theology, and finally the expression of doctrine in oral theology. In his *Drama of Doctrine*, Vanhoozer grounded his doctrinal methods in an exploration in the doctrine of atonement. The final section of the chapter will also engage with the doctrine of atonement from the viewpoint of oral doctrine. As with other chapters, I will begin the journey with a vignette from my own experiences. For that I turn to an exploration of doctrine of atonement and forgiveness in Ethiopia in the next section.

6.2   Doctrine and Healing: A Vignette

After living in India for eight years, my family and I moved to the United Kingdom. Tricia and I began to work in a global capacity, training pastors, churches, and other missionaries how to use oral church-planting strategies. As a result of wars and refugee crises, we were

asked to develop an oral approach to trauma healing that integrated into church-planting. People who have been through traumatic experiences, whether believers or not, have a hard time hearing, understanding, or accepting God's love. We realized that we needed to equip people with tools that would allow them to recognize and address their trauma in order for them to understand and live in the love of Christ.

In 2016 we worked alongside trauma counsellors and church planters to develop a curriculum that reflected best practices in psychology and missions. My wife and I focused on basing the content and the processes in orality while also engaging trauma healing, church strengthening, and multiplication strategies. We developed a set of biblical stories that would allow participants to understand the gospel, the eternal healing that comes from the gospel, and the divine purpose of living out the gospel. The curriculum forms the core of a trauma healing ministry now known as Multiplying Hope.

Each session in the trauma healing curriculum contains a Bible story, a healing activity, and community sharing time. We designed the sessions to be used by small groups of people dedicated to working towards healing as a community. As these groups meet, each person in the group shares their own stories. This allows the group to form a healing community. Each participant begins a journey towards re-narrating their own stories to imagine a story with an eternal God-perspective and purpose. Participants learn basic mental health tools through healing activities that provide a way of embodying healthy processing of their trauma. The core of the materials is a set of biblical stories that focus on the hope of the gospel. These Bible stories help traumatized people move through anger and denial to a place where they have hope, can conceive of a future, and understand God's love for them. This set contains the stories of Joseph, creation, the fall, the bleeding woman from Mark 5, Jesus' death, Jesus' resurrection, and the continuing story of the church whose ultimate fulfilment is found in the second coming of Christ.

As groups were forming and finding healing in the gospel story set, we soon realized we needed to create a second story set that focused on forgiveness for groups who wanted to continue meeting and healing. As groups met, they internalized these Bible stories by listening to the stories, retelling them in the group, acting out the stories, visualizing the stories, and then retelling the stories to others outside the group.

In 2017, we launched one of our first trauma healing projects in Ethiopia alongside our close friends and co-workers, Sebuh and Abeba. Abeba started several trauma healing groups with a variety of participants across four cities in Ethiopia between 2017 and 2019. She started healing groups among churches, alongside non-governmental development organizations (NGOs), and within churches meeting in refugee camps.

As the trauma healing groups met, participants quickly formed strong communities within the groups. Participants reflected upon and worked through trauma by listening well to one another, sharing their stories, and adhering to ground rules that their group established to ensure the group was a place of safety and trust. The goal was for participants to create a strong healing community with one another, and the Ethiopian groups quickly created such communities. In the town of Walisso, a woman named Messi started a trauma healing group in her church with her pastor's blessing. After a week, the twenty-four participants affectionately called Messi 'mother' and showed up to every session. They continued to meet after the end of the trauma healing sessions, calling each other, and participating in one another's lives. Many in the original group of participants met together again to go through the second Bible story set focused on forgiveness.

Messi's group was not the only one that called themselves family. The trauma healing group in the Muslim area of Addis Ababa began to describe their trauma healing groups as the family God had given them. Those in the groups in the Eritrean refugee camps in Shire, Northern Ethiopia, and the group of former sex workers in Addis Ababa similarly described their fellow trauma healing group members as family. One woman

from a group in the countryside surrounding Walisso explained: 'When I joined the group I saw love, I gained confidence, and I listened, and I have a family. The group is my family. They help me to know myself and they help me to know the Word of God. Now I have a confidence'. The same woman who described her trauma healing group as 'family' also described something else that was happening in the groups. As participants internalized the Bible stories, they began to feel that they better understood the doctrinal truths of Scripture.

The experience of the trauma healing groups run by the Ethiopian NGO Ellilta Women at Risk (EWAR) exemplifies this doctrinal understanding. Based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, EWAR helps sex workers leave the sex industry by providing them with holistic and trauma-informed counselling, job training, and housing. After training with Abeba, counsellors from EWAR started a trauma healing group with their clients. They reported that the oral format allowed them to share Scripture with the women in a way they had never been able to before. Whenever counsellors had attempted to use the Bible in counselling sessions before, they were accused of attempting to 'convert' their clients. The Bible stories, however, were not only non-threatening, but they also allowed EWAR's clients to understand God's love in a new way. One woman, a former sex worker, described to Abeba that in the past she would nightly ignore her young daughter's pleas for her to stay home and leave to work in the night clubs. Whatever money she had left over after buying food for her daughter, she used to numb herself with alcohol. One night, a fight broke out in the club where she was working, and she was knocked out. When she woke up, an onlooker approached her and told her that EWAR might help her leave the dangers of sex work. Out of desperation, the woman reached out to EWAR for help — but didn't believe she was worthy enough to receive help. The trauma healing group helped change that perception. As the woman described her experience with the trauma healing program, she recounted the story of the adulterous

woman. Even though religious leaders brought the adulterous woman to Jesus to be stoned, Jesus saved the adulterous woman's life. The woman explained that Jesus' response applied to her: 'Jesus said even to me, "I'm not judging you, but sin no more." He gave [the adulterous woman] a chance to live. So that [Bible story], it makes me understand more. Now I can see through that story how Jesus can give another chance' (Keck 2020). This participant was one of several EWAR clients who understood and accepted Jesus' forgiveness for the first time through the New Hope stories.

Not only did internalizing biblical stories lead to understanding of Christian doctrine, but it also led to people concretely acting on the doctrine they absorbed. In Walisso, several women described how internalizing stories from the Forgiveness story set had led them to seek out people they needed to forgive in their lives. One woman described how the stories made her realize she had not forgiven her brother, to whom she had not spoken for seven years. Immediately after that realization, she went to her brother's house, told him she forgave him, and asked for his forgiveness. Other women told similar stories. Internalizing stories about forgiveness led to reconciliation between husbands and wives; mothers and children; friends and neighbours. Several people mentioned the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers as the reason they decided to reconcile with people in their own lives — and in explaining why they sought out this reconciliation, participants often spontaneously told the story of Joseph. As these trauma healing communities embodied the forgiveness they had internalized through the stories, the groups multiplied. Many of the church members in Messi's group started second generation trauma healing groups of their own — and those groups started third and fourth generation groups within Walisso and the surrounding countryside.

In the Eritrean refugee camp in Shire the trauma healing groups multiplied, and group participants began to tell other people outside the groups the Bible stories. As one man explained, 'Now I have a heart to help others, the people like me. After [trauma

healing], I am looking for those kinds of people and I will bring them, and I will tell them how God helped me'. His words echoed those of the trauma healing participants in Walisso, who described themselves as 'confident' enough in their understanding of Scripture after being a part of the trauma healing groups to share Scripture with their friends, neighbours, and others around them.

The experiences of these storying groups show how doctrine, communicated in oral, performative ways, can have a deep and transformative impact. As the healing groups internalized doctrine, communicated to them through narrative, oral forms, they began to shape their lives in ways that tended to draw on and act according to that doctrine. Such tendencies I will later define as "canonical habitus". For now, it is important to point out that these oral communities communicated and lived according to doctrine.

6.3   Orality and Authority

Abeba became the guide for doctrinal understanding among the people with whom she worked. As they accessed this understanding, they themselves became doctrinal guides within their own healing communities. As doctrinal guides, Abeba and others exercised a ministerial authority in the oral theology of those communities. As this project has previously stated, magisterial authority is found in the biblical canon. Oral theology, being non-textual in nature, bears the danger of giving over magisterial authority to personalities who assume authoritative roles in their communities based upon their position of power, charisma, access to knowledge, or power of persuasion. This danger is of course also quite prevalent in so-called Bible believing, text-based faith communities, an example of which might be mega churches driven by the personalities of their pastors and media personalities. In fact, in the following chapter, I will argue that oral theology and doctrine may provide greater safeguards against heresy. Oral theology does not necessarily preclude textual authority. Scriptural authority requires access to the entire

canon. This access can be provided through audio translations of the biblical text.[31]

However, access alone is not sufficient for right interpretation and application of that text. Oral doctrine provides the direction for engaging fittingly with the biblical text.

The question of authority in oral theology is seemingly impassable as long as one considers oral theology as being completely divorced from the biblical text. A Protestant theology that adheres to the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* is completely dependent upon access, interpretation, and application of the biblical text whether that be through print, audio, video, or other means. Orality scholar Billy Coppedge names this attempt of oral communicators to adhere to a textual authority 'Protestant orality' (Coppedge 2021:101). Coppedge expresses an inherent tension in this Protestant orality in which oral people are expected to faithfully interpret biblical texts. This is problematic if one considers orality and text to be incommensurate with one another. Coppedge references attempts at "oral hermeneutics" proposed by various orality proponents as problematic in that they focus simply on Bible storytelling methods.[32] These approaches tend to focus on rhetorical style rather than the substance of the whole of Scripture. Furthermore, I agree an oral hermeneutic that relies simply upon a narrative rhetorical approach to the text of Scripture is not only an insufficient, anaemic approach to biblical interpretation, but it also ignores the fuller whole-life understanding of oral theology this research project sets forth.

At the same time, questions remain regarding the locus of theological authority. Coppedge concludes from his research among the members of the African Gospel Church in Uganda that even among the self-identified oral people of that community, ultimate authority lay in the material, printed text of the Bible. He suggests that 'neither oral nor

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[31] Bible translation agencies are increasingly beginning Scripture translation with oral drafting of the text. My wife and I are involved with an effort to equip oral Bible translators to engage with the audio of the biblical text in through an embodied, performative, and communal approach. The goal of this oral approach to Bible translation, known as Oral Bible Translation (OBT), is to provide the most accessible form of the entire canon of Scripture to an oral community so that the Scripture is not only in audio from but is also as grounded as possible in oral communication style.

[32] A recent and highly influential example of this narrative approach to oral hermeneutics is Steffen and Bjoraker's *Return of Oral Hermeneutics* (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020) which I critique in chapter three.

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digital versions of the Bible have yet to successfully negotiate and navigate themselves into the authoritative position within the church's socio-theological imaginary' (Coppedge 2021:392). Unfortunately, Coppedge does not fully explore this discovery. The descriptive results of his research project were that the self-identified oral peoples among whom he worked exhibited a material orality, which I discussed in the previous chapter under the rubric of grounded embodiment. However, the issue of the authority of the printed text over digital or aural versions of the text is a crucial question for oral theology. If an oral culture which does not generally rely upon text ascribes authority only to a printed artifact of the biblical canon, it is unlikely that the meaning, direction, and revelation of the text is fully actualized in that culture. Thus, the authority of such a text is incomplete at best and talismanic at worst. Having a printed text may be a helpful artifact, but access to the biblical text in an oral format is critical to oral theology. Perhaps theatre as the space of oral performance of written text might provide a way forward beyond Coppedge's problem of Protestant orality.

The theatrical model may be a middle way between the fixedness of text and the perceived ephemerality of orality. A written theatrical script is meant to be performed; therefore, the meaning of the text is fixed in that there is a canonical version of the text, but the meaning in front of the text is not actualized until it is performed. Some see this performance of the text as the text-performed (Rhoads 2006a). I would suggest that this occurs with a text-embodied in the same way as discussed in chapter five. In this way, the theologian improvises, but does so with the text of Scripture. This improvisation then provides a means of displaying the "world in front of" the text while performing in a manner consistent with and guided by the "world of the text". To put it in speech-act terms, the perlocutionary effects in the lives of disciples are consistent with the illocutionary acts of Scripture. How does one know if they are acting consistently with the illocutions of Scripture? Oral doctrinal guides for the theological interpretation of

Scripture are necessary to resolve the conundrum of Coppedge's so-called Protestant orality.

6.4 Vanhoozer's Theatrical Approach to Doctrine

For these doctrinal guidelines, we now turn to an engagement with Vanhoozer's canonical linguistic approach to theology. A canonical linguistic approach to oral theology places supreme authority in the illocutions of the divine speech-acts of Scripture. Oral theologians guide the oral community in the fitting interpretation and application of these illocutions of Scripture through doctrinal understanding of the *scientia* of the theo-drama, as well as the performance of the *sapientia* of the theo-drama. In oral theology, magisterial authority belongs to Scripture, but there is significant ministerial authority given to the theologian, the community, and church tradition. As with textual forms of theology, privileging any one of the ministerial sources of authority over Scripture may lead to serious heresy. However, "naïve biblicist" approaches that ignore the importance of the interpretive community, the theological guide, and guardrails of church tradition are exposed to similar dangers of theological myopia. An oral approach to doctrine brings all these sources of theology to bear upon the correct interpretation and application of Scripture.

6.4.1 The Dramaturge as doctrinal guide

Within the theatrical model, Vanhoozer likens the theologian to the 'dramaturge' who assists in the 'working of drama'. In theatre, the dramaturge sets a play in its proper historical and analytical context, helping to guide the interactions between playwright, director, script, and audience. Similarly, the dramaturge as theologian sets the script in its proper theo-dramatic context and helps the church understand its place in theo-dramatic action. The dramaturge is called to 'study the playscript and prepare it for performances that truthfully realize its truth'(Vanhoozer 2009:247). Vanhoozer describes the role of the

theological dramaturge as one which encompasses the *scientia* and *sapientia* of theology and aids in creating a dramatic fittingness of the performance of the church.

6.4.2   The role of doctrine in canonical-linguistic theology

If the theologian is the dramaturge who provides the aids in the dramatic fittingness of the church's theological understanding and performance, then doctrine is the dramaturgical direction for fitting participation in the theo-drama. Doctrine provides an understanding of the *scientia* of the text while directing appropriate *sapiential* performance.

> Doctrine serves the church by unfolding the canonical logic of the theo-drama and by offering dramaturgical direction as to how Christians today may participate in and continue the evangelical action in new situations (Vanhoozer 2009:362).

Vanhoozer equates the "world of" the text with the *scientia* of Scripture and the "world in front of" the text with the *sapientia* of Scripture. Though I examined the *scientia* and *sapientia* of theology in greater detail in previous chapters, it is worth briefly touching upon them here. The *scientia* of theology involves the exegesis of scripture. The theologian's role is to perform and safeguard the integrity of exegesis and place it within the theo-dramatic whole. The *sapientia* involves fitting participation in the theo-drama.

6.4.2.1   Doctrine and the *Scientia* of canonical understanding

The directive theory of doctrine provides dramaturgical direction to understanding the plot of the theo-drama. 'Indeed, the whole point of theology as dramaturgy is to help us understand the main idea of the play and the through line of creation and redemption' (Vanhoozer 2009:374). Doctrine provides the exegetical keys to right interpretation of the Scriptural canon which is the norming norm, *norma normans*, of faith and practice of the church. Doctrine is formed by Scripture but is informed by tradition, which is the normed norm, *norma normata*, guiding in the faithful interpretation of Scripture.

The directive theory of doctrine guides Christian disciples to learn their roles in the theo-drama and to fittingly participate therein. In order to know how to fittingly participate, first the performer must know and understand their roles in order to ultimately embody that role. This type of embodiment is more akin to role-becoming than role-playing. In this becoming, the Christian claims his identity in Christ.

Vanhoozer claims that the role or more appropriately, the identity, of the Christian disciple is that of a new creature who is "in Christ" and who has "Christ in him."

> The goal of theological dramaturgy, the *telos* of the actor/disciple, is spiritual communication: performing *Christ* in the power of the Spirit, speaking and acting as a *persona* "in Christ" should speak and act (Vanhoozer 2009:373).

Doctrine directs the disciple to correctly interpret the theo-drama as found in the canon. Doctrine directs the interpretation of the *dramatis personae*, Father, Son, and Spirit, of the theo-drama, and in the light of that, directs the disciple to take on their role within the theo-drama. Doctrine can then direct the fitting participation of the disciple in the theo-drama, the *sapientia* of the theo-drama, the wisdom needed to perform the same story in different contexts for there is only one gospel but many places to perform it.

6.4.2.2   Doctrine and the *Sapientia* of ecclesial performance

The role of doctrine is to guide the church into 'fitting' participation in the theo-drama. In order to guide the performance of the script by the church, the dramaturge must guide in the transposing of praxis. Vanhoozer argues that we see the communication of the script in different cultural and linguistic contexts not as a translation of the script but rather as a transposing of said script — in the same way that a piece of music can be transposed to different keys, the script can be transposed to different contexts. Vanhoozer writes:

> In brief: the sapiential task of theology is that of knowing how to transpose the drama of redemption into the present. Better: theo-dramatic transposition means playing the same drama of redemption in a different cultural key (Vanhoozer 2009:254).

But in order to participate fittingly in the drama, the actors must *want* to fittingly participate. Vanhoozer argues:

> Canonical-linguistic theology is not simply a hermeneutic, a way of dealing with the text, but a way of life: a scripted and spirited performance, a way of wisdom generated and sustained by word and Spirit. As such, it is as concerned with training performers as it is with understanding the script (Vanhoozer 2009:255).

In order to 'train performers' to perform the script and become like Christ, Vanhoozer argues for an understanding of Christ that not only pays attention to what Christ said, but also pays attention to his *habitus*. Through 'indwelling and participating in the canonical practices that point to Christ' his *habitus* can become our *habitus*.

But what does fitting the church into the *habitus* of Christ look like? Here, Vanhoozer returns to the concept of 'fittingness' — that the drama and its continuation must fit into Christ, 'the whole into which all else fits'. In order to be faithful to Christ and to the wider metanarrative of Scripture, everything must be in accordance with and fit into the whole. Vanhoozer describes two aspects of fittingness: fittingness to the canonical text and fittingness to the contemporary context. In order for a performance to be faithful to the script, it must seek to fit into both the canon of scripture and its temporal and cultural context. The role of doctrine is to help people make right judgements about fittingness.

6.5   Oral Theological Approach to Doctrine

Doctrine in oral theology, similarly, directs fitting understanding of and participation in the theo-drama found in Scripture. A framework for an oral approach to doctrine will be discussed in the following sections. First, I will discuss the oral dramaturges and their source of authority. Second, I will explore the role and function of doctrine in oral theology. Third, I will explore the expression of doctrine in oral theology.

6.5.1 Oral Dramaturge

Knighton argues in his article "Orality in the Service of Karamajong Autonomy: Polity and Performance" that orality, and particularly orature serves as a power matrix in Karamajong society (Knighton 2006). Elders acquire, hold, and exert authority through their power of orature, particularly that of prayer. The elders exert their power through the oral recitation of prayer. This prayer serves as a means of recapitulating communal memory and reincorporating Karamajong history into current policy making. This form of authority incorporates the personal authority of a Karamajong elder which is held because he has access to Karamajong tradition and is able to effectively apply that tradition to current circumstances. In Vanhoozerian terms, the Karamajong elder is the dramaturge whose authority rests in his ability to access, and in a way perform, the *scientia* of Karamajong tradition as well as his ability to guide fitting Karamajong policy making by incorporating into it the *sapientia* of the Karamajong tradition. The prayers of the Karamajong elders served as doctrinal guides for Karamajong policy and practice.

Similarly, Abeba, mentioned in the vignette above, is an oral theologian and dramaturgical guide in the *scientia* and *sapientia* of the doctrine of forgiveness. First, she was a trusted source of wisdom for the women. She was not only supported by the church as a trainer, but she also developed ongoing relationships with the women in which she cultivated a community of mutuality and trust. Second, she guided the women into a multi-staged approach to understanding doctrine in light of the gospel. She first walked with the women through a series of biblical stories beginning with the creation of the world, climaxing with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and concluding with the church waiting for the second coming of Jesus. This metanarrative framed a subsequent set of stories, the second stage, which focused on the doctrine of forgiveness in light of the gospel. Third, Abeba cultivated a *habitus* among the women as they were encouraged not only in their understanding of biblical forgiveness but also to allow that understanding to guide their everyday lives. As a result, the participants developed a self-

identity in Christ, restored familial and ecclesial relationships, and felt empowered and equipped to share the forgiveness of Christ with others. Oral theologians like Abeba are dramaturgical guides for faithful and fitting participation of the oral church in the theo-drama.

The Karamajong elders and Abeba held personal authority in not only their position in society, but also in their relationships in society. At the same time, the ultimate source of their authority was based upon their ability to mediate the traditions of that society. In the case of the Karamajong elders, it was Karamajong tradition as laid out in the recitation of Karamajong prayers. In Abeba's case, it was the Tradition of the theo-drama as told through a series of Bible stories. Abeba's choice of biblical stories was guided by: (1) the tradition of interpreting the canonical stories in light of the gospel; (2) the tradition of trauma healing through biblical truth such as forgiveness; (3) her access to the tradition of Christian interpretation of the doctrine of forgiveness through her interactions with her church as well as myself and my wife. The authority of the oral dramaturge is therefore not only positional and relational, but also based upon their access to Tradition as interpreted through tradition and actualized in traditions. Although there is a danger of a type of magisterial authority being given to the oral theologian, the ultimate authority is the Tradition. That Tradition is given authority by the playwright who also simultaneously happens to be the *dramatis persona* of the theo-drama itself, God in self-communication. Oral theologians are fitting doctrinal guides when they submit to this structure of authority, orality under the authority of the biblical text, Protestant orality. One such example of this oral doctrinal *scientia* might be found in the Gospel of John.

Kelber argues that the author of the Gospel of John focused on placing sayings of Jesus, the *logoi,* under the authority of the person of Jesus, the *Logos.* To make this argument, Kelber begins by describing the oral tradition that John both encased and responded to in his gospel. John wrote down the 'sayings', or *logoi,* of Jesus. When

spoken orally, these sayings functioned as a way to reveal Jesus in the present moment. Kelber writes:

> The words, when spoken, are primarily regarded not as carriers of ideas or records of information, but as manifestations of power. They grant access to what is perceived to be real, and post concomitant threats and danger (Kelber 1987:111)

Spoken words, by their nature, are tied to the present moment in which they are spoken, and the authority of spoken words are inextricably linked to the authority of their speaker. Thus, John's audience brought the presence of Jesus into their present through the oral tradition of Jesus' sayings.

Kelber argues that, like Polycarp after him, John saw that focusing on these oral sayings rather than the person of Jesus, could both pull people away from reflecting on Jesus' historical resurrection and distract people from understanding their own future salvation. Thus, John moves from *logoi* to *Logos,* working to bring the sayings of Jesus under the authority of the person of Jesus. While John's gospel is generated from an 'oral, prophetic matrix', John's purpose was not to merely to record oral tradition with text, but to 'recontextualize orality and to devise a corrective against it' by refocusing on the person of Jesus, the narrative of his death and resurrection, and his authority (Kelber 1987:116). The text incorporates oral tradition into itself while also revising and setting standards for that oral tradition. I would argue that orality was not the problematic John was correcting. It was more likely an issue of placing the locus of authority in the person of Christ. Textual authority is only magisterial in that it is the self-revelation of the triune God in communicative action. Similarly, oral theology ascribes authority to God's word, not because of the technology used to record it, text, but because the triune God invites relationship with himself through it. Textual authority in oral theology is personal.

Kelber argues that John assumes and writes that Jesus was divinity incarnated. Since he was incarnated, he was visually and audibly accessible while alive. Once Jesus left, he 'continued exercising influence by passing fully into language', since the early church, through their oral *logoi*, 'rendered [Jesus] present in the community, or at least

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they claimed they did' (Kelber 1987:116). While Kelber writes that John's text served to correct the theology of the early church's oral tradition, he also argues that John's readers read the text 'logocentrally'. Logocentrism contrasts with 'textcentrism'. Textcentrism divorces text from its cultural and historical context, believing that text has a life and meaning of its own. Logocentrism, on the other hand, displaces 'meaning away from the text', placing a text within its cultural context and allowing meaning to transcend text. Kelber argues that 'to regard speech as knowable in terms strictly of itself is a notion that has no conceivable reality in oral culture. Oral utterance cannot exist in transauthorial and transcommunal objectivity' (Kelber 1987:122). Kelber complicates the relationship between the authority of John's text and the authority of the oral traditions surrounding it. He argues that while text is only somewhat supportive of oral attributes and values, and often subverts them, John's oral audience ultimately read the text logocentrically, viewing it not as having a life unto itself, but as rooted in their own oral traditions that made the presence of Jesus present.

Hendricks argues in support of Kelber's descriptions of the interactions between orality and text in John's Gospel (Hendricks 2002). Like Kelber, Hendricks sees John pulling from and interacting with his audience's oral tradition through his introduction of Jesus as *Logos*. John sets Jesus up as the personification of *Logos,* which is then the personification of the 'Word of God'. Under the authority of Jesus, John's written text sets out norms that would guide the oral speeches (*logoi)* of John's audience and act as 'the authoritative record' that anchored their orality.

In his manifesto for the return of the North American evangelical church to sectarianism, Robert Gundry describes a 'Christology of the Word' that becomes the 'totalizing narrative' in the Gospel of John and serves as the main feature of John's sectarianism (Gundry 2001:3). Gundry begins by saying that whether or not the prologue was written before or after the rest of the gospel, '... the portrayal of Jesus as the Word in

John's Prologue works itself out in an emphasis on Jesus' word, or words, in the rest of the Gospel' (Gundry 2001:2). Gundry demonstrates this emphasis by delineating the sheer number of times John explicitly mentions Jesus's words or speaking; by pointing out the unique focus of John as compared to the synoptic gospels; by demonstrating the various synonyms used for Jesus's speaking or words; and by meticulously and systematically analyzing pericopes which focus on Jesus's speech. Through this analysis, Gundry argues for a Word-Christology, in which the words of Jesus are innately tied to the person of Jesus. Gundry concludes:

> Jesus the Word gives voice to the words that God his Father gave him to speak. But here a problem emerges. "The word" . . . does not mean "the speaker" . . . but "what is spoken." Therefore, how can Jesus as a speaker be considered the Word that is spoken? By now the answer should be obvious: the words that the Father has given him to speak deal almost entirely with Jesus himself, nearly to the exclusion of the theme of God's kingdom which dominates the Synoptics, so that not only has the synoptic proclaimer become the Johannine proclaimed. The proclaimer and the proclaimed have also become one and the same. In John, Jesus is what is spoken even as he does the speaking (Gundry 2001:49).

In other words, in the Gospel of John Jesus, as the Logos/Word, voices the words of God the Father that God gave him to speak, and because those words relate so closely to the identity of Jesus himself, through speaking those words Jesus establishes himself as the Word.

Having established the emphasis on Word-Christology in John, Gundry begins to develop his argument for viewing John as a sectarian. Within this argument, Gundry interacts with Kelber. Gundry describes Kelber as offering a view of John that sees the Gospel as 'at war with itself' and accuses Kelber of de-centering the Logos in much the same way as Derrida (Gundry 2001:52). Gundry argues that while Kelber sees John as decentering and deconstructing the words of Jesus, a more proper understanding of John is to see him as presenting 'a metanarrative that superimposes the Word on the words'; in other words, Gundry argues that John is a 'totalizing narrative, thoroughly logocentric' (Gundry 2001:53). According to Gundry, this totalizing narrative, combined with John's demarcation between elected believers and unbelievers and his use of anti-language to

define believers, forms the foundation of a view of the Gospel that sees it as sectarian and separatist (Gundry 2001:56).

As Gundry points out, Jesus's words are not only communicative but performative. When Jesus speaks, something occurs. Gundry writes that 'the conjoining of Jesus' words and the Father's works highlights the performative power of the words. Just as the works are visible words, then, the words are audible works' (Gundry 2001:41). While acknowledging that Greek thought, specifically Greek philosophical conceptions of logos, probably influenced the Johannine concept of *Logos,* Hendricks argues that *Logos* is more clearly tied to Jewish conceptions of wisdom (Hendricks 2014). While Greek thought tended to view Logos in purely intellectual terms, describing Logos as interactions between speech and meaning, the Palestinian Judaean tradition of *davar*, word or wisdom, collapsed word and event into one. 'For the Hebrew,' Hendrick writes, 'There was no "word" which was not a reality. There was no reality which was not a communicable word. Word and action were bound together' (Hendricks 2014:8). In the use of Logos, John imbued the word of the text with the personal authority of the Word, Jesus, while bringing into light not only the textual meaning of the words of the Gospel, but also the theo-dramatic meaning of the action, person, and sayings of the Word of the gospel.

The oral dramaturge finds their ministerial authority in the theo-drama of the biblical canon. The biblical canon finds its authority as God's self-revelation in communicative action. The oral dramaturge is connected to and participates in the divine communion through the indwelling Spirit. So, although the authority of the oral dramaturge submits to the authority of Scripture, the oral dramaturge has access to the divine author and subject of Scripture through the Spirit, creating not only a hermeneutical circle, but also a circle of interpretive authority which is internally pneumatically governed and externally doctrinally governed. The canon is authoritative

in so much as it reveals the words and deed-words of the divine author. The oral dramaturge has ministerial authority as a guide for correct understanding of the theo-drama as well as fitting participation in the theo-drama in word and deed in the power of the Spirit.

Word and action are inseparable in oral theology. The oral dramaturge is the guide for Protestant orality where the right word and fitting action are bound to the biblical text. Oral dramaturgy requires oral access to both the canonical text as well as the tradition of interpretations of that text. However, access alone is not a panacea for incorrect interpretation. Oral theology requires doctrinal direction in word and deed. In the following section we will explore how doctrine might work in oral theology.

6.5.2   The Role and Function of Doctrine in Oral Theology

Oral doctrine is not a set of propositional truths to which one must adhere. Nor is it a set of documents outlining a systematized account of Christian interpretive tradition. Oral doctrine guides oral theology as it seeks to wisely live out the theo-drama, *faith living understanding*.

> Those who, in the absence of written documents, have believed this faith, are barbarians, so far as regards our language; but as regards doctrine, manners, and conversation, they are, because of faith, very wise indeed (Irenaeus quoted in Harrison 2015:98).

As stated in the introduction, our working definition of doctrine is concerned with the beliefs and teaching of the church as it relates to the practices of the church as well as the expressed teaching of the church. Doctrine is a multidimensional concept. In his study of doctrinal criticism, Anglican theologian Alister McGrath defines doctrine and its dimensions. He questions what causes the creation of doctrines and examines the authority of past tradition in Christian doctrinal reflection (McGrath 1990:viii). When describing doctrine, McGrath first and foremost establishes that doctrine is predicated on the historical person of Jesus and the events surrounding him (McGrath 1990:2).

Doctrine, then, 'arises through the attempt to engage with the history of Jesus of Nazareth, as it is transmitted to us through the New Testament tradition, in order to fuse the horizons of this history with our own history' (McGrath 1990:176). The apostles transmitted this history of Jesus through the apostolic kerygma, but McGrath contends that mere repetition of that kerygma was not enough. Thus, doctrine emerged as a way for Christian communities to more deeply interpret scriptural narratives by 'analysing and extending patterns of interpretation which already co-exist with that narrative' (McGrath 1990:4). Doctrine also ensures continuity within that interpretation and resolves or holds 'in creative tension' any of its conflicts (McGrath 1990:3).

McGrath expands on this understanding of doctrine by outlining four key dimensions of doctrine, dimensions with which he believes any theory of doctrine must engage. The first dimension acknowledges that doctrine functions as a way for Christian communities to define and differentiate themselves (McGrath 1990:37). McGrath examines church history to demonstrate how articulations of doctrine tend to occur for two reasons: when different Christian communities seek to differentiate their theologies from one another, such as during the heresies of the mediaeval period, or when Christian communities seek to differentiate themselves from wider society, such as during Christianity's break from Judaism (McGrath 1990:42, 48). McGrath lists several implications of acknowledging the social function of doctrine. First, such acknowledgement demarcates the difference between doctrine and theology by adding a social dimension to the former. 'Theology may be received as doctrine,' McGrath explains, 'without reception, it remains theology' (McGrath 1990:46). The social dimension of doctrine might also illuminate discussion between different denominations and church traditions, explain why some people identify with Christian institutions without accepting their doctrines, and promise a future in which doctrinal expression continues to be important to Christian communities (McGrath 1990:46, 51).

The second dimension of doctrine is its role in the interpretation of scriptural narrative. Since Christianity is rooted in the historical person of and events surrounding Jesus, Christian communities must have 'a willingness to let [Jesus'] story govern that community's understanding of its historical situation and future: its attitudes. . . all are governed by the narrative of Jesus of Nazareth' (McGrath 1990:54). Because narratives are not sets of abstract propositions, they 'demand interpretation', and doctrine provides a framework through which scripture can be interpreted (McGrath 1990:58). In turn, doctrinal statements must be consistent with the scriptural narrative (McGrath 1990:61).

While in the second dimension doctrine interprets narrative, in the third dimension doctrine interprets experience. Since human language cannot capture human experience, doctrine functions as a way for Christian communities to point towards the inexpressible aspects of their faith (McGrath 1990:69). At the same time, doctrine itself shapes the experiences that those communities have. McGrath writes, 'By being viewed in a particular light, experience is correlated with the scriptural narrative and the conceptual framework it engenders and allowed to assume a new significance' (McGrath 1990:71). In other words, as doctrine shapes the communal Christian experience, that experience becomes intertwined with the scriptural narratives from which doctrine comes.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, doctrine functions as a claim to truth. Doctrine does so by referring to a historical event that happened in the past and continues to have repercussions today (McGrath 1990:75). Doctrine works to ensure that Christian declarations of truth remain consistent (McGrath 1990:78). Finally, doctrine clarifies the character of God so that Christian faith can be properly oriented towards a truthful encounter with God (McGrath 1990:79).

As McGrath writes, 'The corporate memory of the community — whether scientific, philosophical or religious — passes on ways of viewing the world, of asking questions, of thinking, to each generation' (McGrath 1990:177). McGrath's conception

of doctrine tends towards the explicit expression of the teachings of the church; however, as he states above, the corporate memory of the church passes on its way of viewing the world. It shapes the worldview of a community which is more or less the church's implicit perception of reality.

Oral doctrine may not adhere to the agreed upon "language" of theology; oral doctrine might be expressed in forms of liturgy, sayings, songs, and other form of worship praxis. However, the foundation and formation of oral doctrine moves beyond dogmatic conceptuality to theological reality. In order to explore this theological reality, we turn to *habitus* as a conceptual frame for the implicit dimension of oral doctrine.

6.5.2.1   Doctrine as *Habitus*

Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* helps us understand the role of doctrine in oral theology. *Habitus* refers to sets of tendencies and predispositions that shape a person's thoughts and action. These tendencies derive from history — a person's interactions with the patterns and norms of society, which are themselves derived from *habitus*. Such history and *habitus* become so deeply ingrained that a person draws from them mostly unconsciously. Thus, Bourdieu describes *habitus* as 'embodied history' and quotes Durkheim in saying that 'in each of us, in differing degrees, is contained the person we were yesterday'(Bourdieu 2008:56).

The mostly unconscious directives of *habitus* both shape a person's interactions with the world and are shaped by the world. Bourdieu describes them as 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures'(Bourdieu 2010:72). In other words, *habitus* consists of a system of structures that tend to structure a person's interactions in the world, but at the same time *habitus* is structured itself by the world around it. *Habitus* critiques both those who see people's actions as purely mechanical or entirely dependent on sets of rigid social rules as well as those who see people's interactions with the world as completely unstructured.

Bourdieu sees concepts as "a position in a space" and "a kind of shorthand for a series of practical operations" (Bourdieu 2020:8). *Habitus* relates to memory; Bourdieu describes people as 'social subjects endowed with memory' and further specifies that such memory 'is what I have called the "habitus": it is the inertia of all the past experience that we have accumulated in our biological bodies' (2020:20-1). Bourdieu writes of "two dimensions" of habitus: "the inclination to" and "the ability to" (2020:25). A habitus shapes someone's interactions with the world and objects around them because a habitus both *inclines* a person to certain actions and gives them the *ability* to correctly execute those actions. For example, the correct *habitus* might predispose someone to communicate through letter-writing while also giving that person access to the knowledge they need to write the letter (2020:25).

In his lectures on *habitus* and field, Bourdieu considered the Church and Christianity in terms of those concepts. When talking about "the Church" Bourdieu refers to the institution of the church, including in his concept of the church all its members, clergy, 'material paraphernalia', theology, and the relationships between these things (2020:18). In other words, Bourdieu sees the Church as 'the sum of the objective relations between all these people [bishops, clearly, theologians, Catholic intellectuals] — it is by and large what I call a "field"' (2020:19).[33] Bourdieu does not see the Church as a single field that people enter, but as a collection of fields and habituses constantly interacting with and in conversation with each other. As Bourdieu writes:

> The Church as a living reality will be a permanent dialectic between these fields, which are spaces of constraint, and the various habitus that encounter these given fields while trying at the same time to transform them, although in trying to transform them they will themselves be transformed, and so on and so forth. (2020:21)

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[33] Bourdieu defines "field" as 'a space of constraint that is itself a perpetual focus of conflict and is transformed by the outcome of the constraints that it imposes on the agents within it' (2020:21).

The canon-sense as described by Vanhoozer is one form of *habitus* that enters into this paradigm as one *habitus* in conversation with many: with the cultural habitus embodied in a particular community or person, a particular denomination, or a person's class or race.

Habitus is central to Bourdieu's theory of practice, which sees people participating in society through specific practices which are governed by underlying tendencies. It is worth once again quoting Bourdieu's description of *habitus* here:

> The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus (Bourdieu 2010:78).

Thus, Bourdieu describes people as improvising within a set structure. In oral theology, doctrine operates on the same level as Bourdieu's *habitus*. That is not to say that doctrine is not expressed, as I will explore later in this chapter; however, those expressions follow a tacit structure, a *habitus*. In this way, oral doctrine operates similarly to Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic doctrine which operates as the grammar of theological thought, speech, and action. As has been mentioned elsewhere in this research, the Achilles heel to Lindbeck's approach is that it could potentially lead to an anything-goes approach to theology as long as that theology conforms to the grammar or doctrine that is established by the closed system of that culture. Oral theology could fall into a similar trap. As such, I propose that we return to Vanhoozer's categories of Tradition, tradition, and traditions.

Drawing from Bourdieu, we can argue for a "canonical habitus" in which Tradition, the ongoing theo-drama as revealed through Scripture, serves as the outside history that shapes *habitus*. Bourdieu describes the outside history that shapes *habitus* as objective in the sense that it contains information located outside a person. In canonical habitus, Tradition functions as this perceived reality and history. Canonical habitus views doctrine not as a set of declarations codifying abstract truth, but as a set of historically constituted practices.

Ideally the practices of doctrine become so ingrained in a person that they shape the tendencies of that person's thought and action.[34] Someone can still act contrary to doctrinal practice, as *habitus* exerts a strong but not absolutely binding influence on thought and action. Doctrinal practices can themselves be warped in a way inconsistent with scriptural truth. *Habitus* is formed dialectically and can be shaped and changed through the interaction of both agency and institution. Thus, a person may act outside of sound doctrine based on their own agency, or they may deviate from doctrinal practices given to them by a society or institution that has misinterpreted scripture in creating its doctrine. Therefore, oral canonical habitus must be structured by Tradition, the interpretation of which is structured by tradition, which refers to the way in which the universal church has interpreted and applied the canon throughout space and time. In this sense oral doctrine as *habitus* is both canonical as well as catholic. Oral doctrine is canonical habitus in that the outside history that structures oral doctrine is the Tradition of the theo-drama as revealed through the canon of Scripture. This canonical habitus is also catholic habitus in that it is aware of the other outside history – the tradition of the universal church's attempts to interpret and embody the theo-drama. The great creeds of the church operated as a means for the community to interpret Scripture. Those creeds have now become tradition which guides the church in the interpretation of Scripture which in turn forms their local church traditions. Likewise, in oral theology, the doctrinal practices that are formed by canonical habitus and informed by tradition become theo-dramatically fitting traditions of local oral theology.

Oral doctrine is expressed in a variety of ways: liturgy, songs, dance, proverbs, and storytelling. However, the question remains, if doctrine in oral theology is mostly a form of implicit *habitus* or doctrinal practices that are a form of phronetic improvisations of

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[34] I will explore the doctrine of atonement as a doctrinal practice below.

the canon, then how does one know which practices are correct when there is disagreement? Church history is full of great disagreements over doctrine. The great controversies and heresies of the church have occurred among the most learned theologians the church has had to offer. These controversies were the problems that led to the great councils and creeds of the church. The meetings of these counsels which produced creeds were very practical occasions driven by 'the urgent need to address heresy'(Kelsey 1975:212). Vanhoozer defines heresy in the following way:

> Heresy is dangerous because it proposes an alternative economy of salvation—not that there is one. *A heresy is thus a fateful error that compromises the integrity of the theo-drama, either by misidentifying the divine dramatis personae, misunderstanding the action, or giving directions that lead away from one's fitting participation in the continuing dramatic action* (Vanhoozer 2009:424 emphasis original).

Oral theologians are certainly not immune to such issues; however, the fact that they are oral does not doom them to make the same (or even greater) heresies that were made in the past. In fact, given Vanhoozer's definition above, theologians in theological institutions may have much to learn from oral theologians.

As he engaged with the concept of canonical habitus introduced in this thesis, Chinese theologian Damon So, shared an illustration of the outworking of canonical habitus.

> In Chinese, 精神/'spirit', or more precisely 基督的 精神 / 'spirit of Christ', may function like the canonical habitus espoused by the student. Note that 精神 corresponds to the 'spirit' in lower case while 聖靈 'corresponds to the 'Holy Spirit' with Spirit in the upper case. The Holy Spirit, 聖靈 . conveys the spirit of Christ, 基督的 精神, to believers. In Chinese, there is no confusion between the agent of communion – the Holy Spirit, 聖靈 – and the content of communion – 精神/spirit – because Chinese has completely different writings and pronunciations for these two terms. 基督的 精神 / 'spirit of Christ' in Chinese functions like canonical habitus in the sense that (i) it corresponds to the mind or the spirit of Christ, (ii) it fills the believer's mind and heart and (iii) this 精神 in the heart and mind of a believer is expressed outwardly in performative action since 精神 denotes both the inner thought *and* the outer action of a person, thus functioning much like *rûah* in Hebrew (So 2023).

So's example illustrates the need for voices beyond the traditional Western understanding of theology and doctrine. Oral communities are most likely to reflect rather than express oral doctrine. Oral doctrine, as canonical habitus, operates at the core of a community of believers. As the canon forms *habitus*, the community of believers are invited to fittingly participate in the theo-drama by allowing the theo-drama to become the defining story

that forms the worldview of the community. The worldview of a community defines its perception of reality. If the biblical canon forms the identity of the Christian worldview, then fitting participation resonates with a community whose practices are formed by canonical habitus. Heretical or un-fitting participation conversely would create a dissonance from the community's conception to the point of requiring correction. The following section will describe how this canonical habitus is formed and controlled.

6.5.2.2 Oral Doctrine and Informal Controlled Stories

In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Wright argues that understanding Jesus as a historical figure requires understanding Jesus' worldview and mindset (Wright 1999). Wright defines worldview as 'the lenses through which a society looks at the world, the grid upon which are plotted the multiple experiences of life' and identifies the four main interacting and overlapping features of worldview as 'characteristic stories; fundamental symbols; habitual praxis; and a set of questions and answers (who are we? where are we? what's wrong? what's the solution? and what time is it?)' (Wright 1999:138). He argues that the worldview a person holds creates a set of beliefs and aims out of which that person acts. In short, worldview is one's perception of reality. In Bourdieusian terms, the worldview of a person is the understanding of the perceived reality that forms *habitus*. For Wright, this reality for Jesus was defined by the story of God's ongoing covenantal promise and the fulfilment of that promise with Israel. Worldview is expressed through the stories that we tell. In order to assure that those stories adhere to correct doctrine, or in our terms, canonical habitus, the community must tell the right stories. The testimonial stories of Jesus grounded the identity of the early Christian community and Jesus' story was grounded in the story of Israel.

> The community's vital interest in affirming its identity by means of telling Jesus-stories, so long regarded within some critical circles as a good reason for reducing the stories to terms of the community, is in fact nothing of the kind. That reductionism turns out to be an ahistorical assumption, based on a flawed epistemology and a misreading of the Jewish worldview, and characterized by an over-active zeal for detecting conspiracies (Wright 1999:136).

In other words, Wright agrees that a paradigm of Jesus' life must be situated within oral tradition. Stories, Wright says, 'are fundamental' (Wright 1999:136). But just because Jesus' community primarily understood Jesus through stories does not mean that the community bent those stories in whatever manner they wanted. Instead, the community itself preserved the content of those stories through controlled oral traditions.

Wright uses Kenneth Bailey's argument of the Jesus stories as informal-controlled oral tradition as a working model through which to understand how information about Jesus was transmitted both within oral traditions and in ways that retained control over the content of that information (Wright 1997).

Drawing on twenty years of ethnographic observation in the Middle East, Kenneth Bailey describes oral traditions in terms of two aspects: formality and control. In formal oral traditions, information is formally transmitted from teachers to students. Informal oral traditions have no specific systems of teachers or students. Bailey describes three levels of control in oral traditions: no flexibility, some flexibility, and total flexibility. Controlled oral traditions can have either no flexibility, in which information must be transmitted verbatim, or some flexibility, in which 'the central threads of the story cannot be changed, but flexibility in detail is allowed' (Bailey 1995:7). In uncontrolled oral traditions both the details and central threads of a story can be changed because a community sees no value in preserving the content of a story.

Bailey describes two opposing views of the oral tradition in the Synoptic Gospels in terms of these two aspects. He calls the Bultmannian view 'informal, uncontrolled oral tradition' because Bultmann believes the early Church did not pass down information about Jesus within a system of teachers and students and also did not exert controls on the content of that information. Bailey describes the Scandinavian school's opposing view as 'formal, controlled oral tradition' because the Scandinavian school believes the early Church passed down information about Jesus within a system of teachers and students

and exercised strict control over the content of that information. While Bailey acknowledges that both views have oral counterpoints in the Middle East, he argues that a third Middle Eastern oral tradition may provide a better blueprint for understanding the Synoptic Gospels.

Bailey calls his third approach 'informal, controlled oral tradition' and offers it as an alternative view of the oral tradition in the Synoptic Gospels. In this tradition, oral communities do not pass on information within a system of teachers and students, though different forms of oral communication within the tradition may have controls on who gets to share information within certain contexts, e.g. the oral theologian/dramaturge. Though material of that oral communication may be somewhat flexible in that certain details or wording might change from telling to telling, the core of the material and its message remains consistent across tellings.

Wright and Bailey pave a way for understanding how oral doctrine can be deeply situated within *habitus* as well as serve as a solid canonical foundation. In the same way that an academic institution might teach doctrine within a formal, controlled non-oral tradition, oral communities teach doctrine within informal, controlled oral tradition. The informal, controlled use of the canonical story serves to address issues of doctrine and practice. These informal, controlled stories are founded upon the canonical habitus formed by Scripture. As the oral theologian uses these informal, controlled stories, they provide doctrinal direction for faith and practice. The use of the stories themselves continue to form the canonical habitus of the oral community as the community uses these in informal, controlled stories in new situations.

The vignettes that have been used throughout this research project illustrate the use of informal, controlled canonical stories as doctrinal direction. King Atchiba told the story of Creation not only to bring peace to his people, but he also used the story as an informal, controlled story that realigned the thoughts and actions of his people with the doctrine of

Creation. This led to an understanding of the doctrine of man, especially man in relation to the doctrine of God which connected the Anii to an understanding of their identity as a people in light of their relationship with the creator God and each other bringing peace among warring clans. Similarly, in a later vignette, Abdullah used a metanarrative representation of the canonical story to identify and teach a doctrine of sin which exposed the true needs of his audience. Madame Gomon and her family followed the narrative logic of the biblical stories to develop a correct understanding of the doctrine of Jesus despite their previous misunderstanding of the sonship of Christ. Similarly, Swami Mukhtanand utilized the story of the book of Revelation to express a fuller understanding of the doctrine of Jesus in light of eschatological realities. Finally, Abeba and the women she walked alongside developed a canonical habitus by practicing forgiveness in light of the doctrine of atonement as seen in the biblical stories. This canonical habitus provided the direction for their relationships, their identity in Christ, and their decision-making. Canonical habitus, or oral doctrine, tends to operate at the worldview level, meaning that it is generally a tacit understanding guiding the thoughts and actions of the community. However, oral doctrine also finds its expression in embodied worship and practices. It is to that expression to which we turn in the next section.

6.5.3   The Expression of Oral Doctrine

Prosper of Aquitaine's assertion that *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* [that the order of supplication determines the rule of faith] became the basis for *lex orandi, lex credendi.* Literally translated, *Lex orandi lex credendi* means 'As we worship, so we believe'. The rule of prayer is, in other words, worship. Worship, which is outwardly and communally expressed through Christian liturgy, shapes the way Christians believe. Thus the axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi* became a key part in debates over the role of liturgy in Christian life. I argue that it continues to ring true in the role of worship and oral doctrine.

South African theologian Piet Naudé defines oral theology in terms of the worship and liturgy of oral communities in *The Zionist Christian Church in South Africa: a case-study in oral theology* (Naudé 1995). For Naudé the religious experience of oral societies in South Africa is (1) communal, i.e. liturgical, (2) positive, i.e. constructive, and (3) mediated, i.e. sung or danced. Doctrine for Naudé is 'covertly present in the narrative and social dimension' and finds its expression through the worship and liturgy of the community (Naudé 1995:2). Communal experience guides correct interpretation and correct worship performance. Thus, experience guides correct theological interpretation and application in community. In other words, the underlying narratives of the community formulate social worldviews and practices which formulate doctrinal guides for communal interpretation of Scripture. That interpretation finds its expression through the worship of the community. This is very similar to what I am postulating as canonical habitus with one important difference. Canonical habitus is formed by the theo-drama as communicated through Scripture. However, for Naudé, the underlying narratives that inform correct interpretation are a mixture of biblical and local oral tradition. Nevertheless, Naudé locates magisterial authority in Scripture. The tradition of interpretation, the catholic interpretation, in Vanhoozer's terms, is provided by outside theologians who commence a dialog between the local and universal church. Naudé suggests that this is the way oral doctrine might be judged (Naudé 1995:132–3).

At the same time, Naudé postulates that the most pressing issue with oral doctrine is not whether oral doctrine is biblical but rather whether one can determine what the doctrine is at all. For that, he turns to the hymnody of the South African Venda people. Naudé suggest that doctrine in the Venda oral culture can be found in performance of its songs by Itsani singers (Naudé 1995:39). These singers are not experts. They are both performers and audience. So, the act of worship is very communal. The 'credal interest' in Venda worship is always communal; their expression of belief is 'not I believe, but

always we believe…' (Naudé 1995:40). For Naudé, doctrinal expression is characterized by: (1) repetition in that important concepts are organized in mnemonic, repetitive patterns; (2) participation in the community that is often in response to a particular problem or situation in the community; and (3) is often polemic in nature in that an in-group identity is constructed and confirmed through hostility towards out-groups in a way that controls heretical thinking.

Naudé's understanding of oral theology and oral doctrine in Venda worship illustrates that oral doctrine is formed through *habitus* and expressed through worship. Worship and liturgy in oral theology serves to express doctrine, to remember doctrine, and to control correct doctrine. Although he suggests that ultimate authority for doctrine lies in Scripture, Naudé places strong emphasis on communal experience and tradition in the formation of doctrine. Experience informs doctrine and doctrine informs the interpretation of other experiences. At the risk of proposing a Lindbeckian experiential-expressive approach to doctrine, I would suggest that the formulation and expression of oral doctrine relies heavily upon experience. An approach to oral doctrine as canonical habitus provides a corrective balance. In canonical habitus, the reality that experience is interpreting is the Tradition, or theo-drama as communicated through Scripture. Canonical habitus is formed through the interpretation and performance of the theo-drama. The interpretation of the theo-drama is impacted not only through the experience of the local community, but also through the interpretive experience of Christian communities throughout history.

Embodied experience is a key characteristic of oral theology. Edward Schillebeeckx argues that doctrine is developed 'from a critical translation of Christian experience from one historical era to the next' (Thompson 2001:303). Schillebeeckx sees history as interpreted experience. Upon the ever-changing stage of history, Schillebeeckx identifies three main criteria to determine the orthodoxy of dogma and doctrine. The first criterion,

the proportional norm, refers to the relationship between acts of faith and the cultural 'structuring elements' that express that act. Since 'any purely theoretical understanding of the faith is an impossibility within the epistemological conditions of human historicity', faith is always interpreted through culture. It's the proportions between the cultural elements and action of faith that the church 'translates' throughout history. The second criterion for orthodoxy, orthopraxis, refers to the way the church translates the proportional norm throughout history. Theory and practice are related because 'the future cannot be theoretically interpreted; it must be done'. The final criterion for orthodoxy is reception by the 'whole people of God', including clergy and laity. This is an ongoing process in which 'the community must continually translate and re-enact the previously accepted understanding of faith within its own era' (Thompson 2001:313). Schillebeeckx, like Naudé, may have placed too much authority in experience, but the importance of faithful performance of doctrine in community remains. Oral doctrine is not only believed. It is lived and performed. It is expressed in the liturgy and worship of oral communities for fitting participation in the theo-drama.

Carol Harrison proposed that the early church fathers had a staged approach to fitting participation in the theo-drama. A person must first hear the correct doctrine before they can then believe. In the context of believing, then the person can fittingly participate. Harrison uses Augustine as an example as he laid out his understanding of Christian doctrine in his *Enchiridion*, 'Like faith, doctrine here is understood not so much as a matter of right knowledge, but of right attitude of the will, or right worship, expressed in faith, hope, and love' (Harrison 2015:90). In the catechumen of the early church, the Creeds were recited and memorized publicly, not to provide a cognitive framework for correct theological thought, but to produce belief. That belief bent the will of the person towards the will of God so that doctrine would not lead simply to right thinking but more importantly to right worship and practice. So, for Augustine, doctrine has much more to

do with fitting emotion and worship that leads to fitting practice than it does with correct knowledge. Similarly, oral doctrine, seen through the lens of *habitus* focuses on the worldview and beliefs of a community that produces worship which becomes the doctrinal guide for belief and practice.

Christian anthropologist James Smith goes one step further in turning the role of doctrine and worldview in the Christian life upside-down.

> Too often we try to define the essence of Christianity by a summary of doctrines. We turn to texts and to theologians in order to discern the ideas and beliefs that are distinctive to Christianity. . .what if we sought to discern not the essence of Christianity as a system of beliefs (or summarized in a worldview) but instead sought to discern the shape of Christian faith as a form of life? Instead of turning to texts, doctrines, and the theoretical articulations of theologians, we will consider what Christians do — or more specifically, what the church as a people does together in the "work of the people" (leitourgos) (Smith 2009:133).

In other words, instead of codified doctrines and worldviews informing Christian practices, those practices themselves, in forms such as worship and liturgy, shape doctrine and worldview. The former, a 'top-down, ideas-first' placement of doctrine and worldview, does not explain the early church's ability to worship and interact with Scripture before codifying its doctrine. Nor does it fit with anthropological evidence of faith among those who do not have access to or cannot grasp doctrine. Instead, Smith argues that we should understand Christian faith through a 'bottom-up, practices-first' model. He argues that, since humans are 'embodied, affective creatures', Christian practices and liturgies both dispose Christians to act in certain ways and those actions in turn dispose Christians to certain practices and liturgies. Smith echoes Bourdieu by focusing on social imaginaries. Social imaginaries echo habitus in that they are precognitive and prereflective tendencies towards certain habitual actions; Smith contrasts social imaginaries with worldviews, which he describes as systems of beliefs, and locates social imaginaries in a society's stories, myths, images, and practices.

Is doctrine the guide for interpreting the canon and theological experience or is it a product of interpretation and experience? If we take oral doctrine as canonical habitus,

then perhaps the answer is both. Bourdieu states that *habitus* both guides practices and is formed by those practices. If we take doctrine to be canonical habitus, then reality is defined by the biblical canon. Three guides provide direction for the right interpretation of the biblical canon, the *scientia* of doctrine. First, it is guided by the self-revelation of the triune God through the canon and through the indwelling Spirit. Second, trusted dramaturges assist the interpretation of the canon and serve as doctrinal guides to interpreting that canon through tradition. Third, these interpretations and subsequent applications of the canon formulate a canonical habitus which itself assists correct interpretation of the canon. Worship, liturgy, storytelling, and creeds become the expression of the more or less implicit canonical habitus. These expressions serve to guide fitting participation in the theo-drama, the *sapientia* of doctrine, while also serving as guardrails to delimit fitting from unfitting participation. An oral doctrine may seem at first impossible without writing or listing propositional truths. However, canonical habitus mediated through the experience of a particular oral community in a particular oral culture can provide the sort of doctrinal direction Vanhoozer espouses in his theatrical model. In order to test this approach to oral doctrine, I will examine an oral approach to the doctrine of atonement in the following section.

6.6   The Doctrine of Atonement

The doctrine of atonement is central to Christianity. Atonement establishes the reason why Jesus had to die and explains what his death accomplished. Atonement also establishes the identity of a believer as one in-Christ. The *telos* of atonement is the narrative logic of all of Scripture and the lens through which the canon might be correctly interpreted. The cruciform performance of the church is intended to bring wholeness across sociological, political, and cultural divides. This doctrine is the core of Christian life and should produce an appropriate canonical habitus. In the following sections, I will

engage with Vanhoozer's sciential and sapiential approaches to doctrine and explore what that might look like in an oral doctrine of atonement.

6.6.1   The *Scientia* of Atonement

Vanhoozer's approach to atonement does not privilege one metaphor above another. It allows the complexity of the canonical account of Jesus' death to speak to multiple themes and metaphors. A postpropositional theology seeks '…to prolong rather than relax the tension created by the canonical dialogue' (Vanhoozer 2009:385). Some traditions privilege a penal-substitionary understanding atonement over other atonement metaphors while others prefer relational restoration. Vanhoozer's approach confirms the validity of both approaches while opening the atonement to a plenitude of creative understandings of the work of Jesus on the cross.

An oral approach to the *scientia* of atonement seeks to understand the canonical metanarrative of the atonement rather than focusing on a single, ruling metaphor. Basing the canonical habitus of atonement upon a framing metanarrative of Scripture opens the doctrine to a holistic approach that moves beyond a simple statement of propositional truths to the creation of a world which the disciple is invited to inhabit. This becomes the canonical reality of the atonement which guides both interpretation and participation of the Christian disciple. However, just which metanarrative of atonement and which narrative logic is to be primarily used is culturally mediated.

David Kelsey describes three types of narrative: creation, consummation, and reconciliation. For Kelsey, these are the three great plotlines of the Bible (D. F. Ford 2011). These particular plotlines form three narrative logics, and the particular logic one follows is determined by the doctrine one is wishing to explicate. Abeba used a particular narrative logic when she chose biblical stories to explicate the doctrine of forgiveness. My wife and I followed another type of logic when choosing stories to develop a gospel metanarrative in the trauma healing curriculum. The narrative logic for atonement is

similarly determined by the doctrine; however, it is also culturally conditioned. Vanhoozer ascribes this culturally conditioned approach to atonement as the use of varying framing metaphors. I would argue that these culturally conditioned approaches to metaphor have more to do with the *habitus* of the time and culture in which the doctrine is expressed. The *habitus* is guided by the metanarrative of the community which forms the narrative logic through which the doctrine of atonement is approached. In the next section, I will explore a few examples of narrative logic along with a proposal for an oral approach to the *scientia* of the doctrine of atonement.

6.6.1.1 <u>Atonement Theories</u>

In order to explore how various communities hold theories of atonement that follow different narrative logics and are culturally conditioned, it is useful to understand the various theories of atonement and the cultures and histories from which they arose. While arguing for a Christus Victor view of atonement, Gustaf Aulén provides a broad historical overview of various theories of atonement. In his answer to postmodern critiques of atonement, Vanhoozer proposes understanding atonement in terms of an economy of excess, which reconciles various historical views of atonement. Similarly, Jackson Wu looks for unity between theories of atonement by revealing the cultural background of those theories and arguing that biblical understandings of atonement probably arose from an honour-shame culture.

In his book *Christus Victor*, Gustaf Aulén examined the doctrine of atonement throughout church history and proposes a new way of understanding the church's conceptualization of atonement through time (Aulén 2016). As he does so, Aulén argues for a return to what he terms a 'Classic idea' of atonement, one which views the doctrine as the dramatic victory of Jesus over sin and death that allows humans to have a relationship with God, or *Christus Victor* (Aulén 2016).

Aulén identifies three main areas into which theologians' ideas of atonement fit: the Classic idea of atonement, the Latin theory of atonement, and 'subjective' understandings of atonement. The Classic idea of atonement 'emerges with Christianity itself'(Aulén 2016:120). Aulén argues that this is the New Testament understanding of atonement. In the Classic idea, God reconciles the world to himself through atoning work that is continuously worked out through the work of the Holy spirit. This view considers sin an 'objective power' that God defeats, and salvation as God's victory over sin.

The Latin theory of atonement originated in the western world during the Middle Ages, was briefly supplanted by Luther's return to the Classic idea of atonement, and then returned in the teaching of Luther's followers and post-Reformation theology. While the Classic idea of atonement might sometimes use the language of law to describe atonement, the Latin theory frames the atonement almost solely in legal terms. In this theory, Jesus takes the punishment humans deserve for breaking the laws of God. The Latin theory includes the Penal Substitution understanding of atonement.

Finally, subjective ideas of atonement shift the emphasis of the atonement away from a focus on what God does for humanity and towards what humans do for one another because of the atonement. In this view, the 'effect of Christ's work is that God, seeing the character of Christ, and His place as the Representative Man, gains a new and more hopeful view of humanity'(Aulén 2016:118).

Vanhoozer, on the other hand, uses postmodern deconstructions of the doctrine of atonement as a launching point from which he argues for an unreduced, holistic view of atonement in his chapter in Hill and James' *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole*, "The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats, and Gifts" (Vanhoozer 2004). Though there is not necessarily a distinctly postmodern doctrine of atonement, postmodernists offer deconstructive critiques of traditional atonement theories. Postmodern theorists point out

the contradictions that seem inherent in the doctrine. To begin with, Vanhoozer points out the postmodern push against seeking to completely understand — by seeking to reduce an "other" into our own terms and modes of understanding, we violate the other. Justice, in these terms, means leaving something, in all its complexity, alone. In general, then, postmodernist reactions to atonement tend to be rooted in a distaste for the reductionism of traditional theological thought.

Vanhoozer specifically points out three problems postmodernist deconstruction of penal substitution raises: the theological move 'from many metaphors to one, and from the one metaphor to a single concept'; the violence and vengeance inherent in many traditional theological conceptions of the cross; and the difficulty of putting penal substitution into practice. Especially as we consider doctrine in terms of habitus, the last issue undergirds all the others. The actions Christians take both in their daily lives and within corporate religion stems from what they believe. Thus, Vanhoozer points out the postmodern view that doctrines of atonement reflect more the cultures from which they come than the views of Scripture and the historical Jesus.

Vanhoozer writes that, in order to answer postmodern critique, 'The challenge for theology is to "theorize" the cross (i.e., in a doctrinal formulation) while simultaneously respecting it (i.e., as an "other" that eludes our conceptual grasps)' (Vanhoozer 2004:loc.4032). To do this, Vanhoozer contrasts the logic of two economies: the economy of exchange, which is found in more traditional views of atonement, and the economy of excess, which Vanhoozer considers a postmodern answer to postmodern deconstruction. He shows the different approaches these economies take in three area of atonement, which he labels guilt, goat, and gift.

In guilt, Vanhoozer contrasts the view of Jesus' death as payment of debt with a view of Jesus' death as 'what is in excess of the law'. According to traditional views of Jesus' death, such as the penal substitution view, Jesus redirected God's wrath against

humanity onto himself by dying in our place. Postmodernists such as Ricoeur critique such a system, pointing out the never-ending cycle of violence embedded in retributive justice. Others critique the individualization of justice within this view. Still others argue that penal substitution ignores God's focus on relational restoration.

Vahoozer uses Derrida's view of justice — in which deconstruction of laws itself functions as justice — to build a case for viewing Jesus' death as the fulfilment of a covenant between humans and God. Vanhoozer points out the inadequacies in penal substitution's view of Jesus' death and pulls from Milbank to argue that 'the church's attitude and practice concerning law, guilt and punishment ought to proceed from the ontological order of trinitarian peace, not the Darwinian order where creatures fight to survive' (Vanhoozer 2004:loc.4178)

In goats, Vanhoozer examines the metaphor of sacrifice. Postmodernists such as Girard critique the traditional view of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb by pointing out the violence inherent in sacrifice, and questioning if such a metaphor might allow religion to condone violence. Vanhoozer records Girard's postulation that Jesus' death served two purposes: to reveal the violence of sacrifice to the world in order to stop that violence, and to overthrow the violent authority of his time. Vanhoozer, however, also points out that Girard fails to demonstrate why Jesus' death was necessary.

Finally, in gifts, Vanhoozer describes the postmodern pushback against the metaphor of gifts. Here, he writes of the postmodern critique of gifts, which argue that nothing can ever be truly given because every gift creates and participates in an economy of debt. Vanhoozer, however, points to Ricoeur's complication of that narrative; Ricoeur points out that, in the death of Jesus, God gives himself to be known. Vanhoozer ends by proposing that we place excess rather than exchange at the centre of atonement. He sees Jesus' death as encompassing all the various atonement aspects hypothesized.

> God reconciles the world to himself by providing his own Son as a substitute for the exile that should be ours. Jesus is God's gift, the goat that bears our guilt — the covenant curse, separation from the promises of God — who in doing so enables our covenant restoration, *Jesus' death on the cross is at*

once an exodus and an exile, the condition of the possibility of our entry to the promised land of the Holy Spirit (Vanhoozer 2004:loc.4385)

Ultimately, Vanhoozer concludes that the atonement is bigger than what we can imagine. Agreeing with David Tracy, he writes that we must understand 'the cross as a nonreductive, saturated phenomenon that refuses to be assimilated by medieval or modern theories alike'(Vanhoozer 2004:loc.4411). However, Vanhoozer does believe that there are a few truths that are knowable about the cross and its atonement, and there are practical ways to live out the truth of the cross. First, he sees the cross as a critique of organized religion that makes way for true spirituality. 'A doctrine of atonement that pretends to explain fully the saving significance of Jesus' death is probably guilty of preferring the clarity of unifying concepts to the messiness of multiple metaphors'(Vanhoozer 2004:loc.4416). Practically, this means that atonement calls for offering one's life and way of living to God. Second, Vanhoozer argues that we can know that Jesus' death is at the centre of salvation, and that the atonement refers to how God gives himself to humanity. Finally, Vanhoozer describes atonement as the way through which God blesses humanity and has a relationship with them.

Like Vanhoozer, theologian and missiologist Jackson Wu sees some measure of truth in many theories of atonement. In fact, Wu claims that church unity and clarity on various theories of atonement is one of his key aims. Therefore, he proposes a way to understand atonement that reconciles several theories of atonement. Wu argues that all theories of atonement are contextualized, since 'Even the questions we ask and emphasize will shape our doctrine of atonement' (Wu 2022:14). Therefore, in order to understand, communicate, and live out atonement fully, Wu argues that we must examine our own assumptions regarding atonement as well as the assumptions from which biblical authors wrote about atonement.

Since Wu argues that every theory of atonement is necessarily shaped by the culture of those who put forth the theory, he outlines not only the history of major theories of

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atonement but also the cultural assumptions that may have shaped them. Recapitulation theory, with proponents such as Irenaeus and Athanasius, was anti-gnostic, which meant that its proponents focused on the goodness of creation. In this theory, Jesus paid our debt in order for us to be free and to restore us to our original state. Christus Victor focuses instead on Jesus' victory over various enemies, including sin, death, and Satan. Christus Victor is often widely accepted in fear-power cultures. Satisfaction theory sees Jesus' death as a fulfilment of our obligation to give honour to God — a 'positive debt'. Developed by Anselm of Canterbury, satisfaction theory opposes ransom theory's contention that Jesus' death was a ransom on behalf of humans. Instead, this theory draws from landowner/tenant relationships of its time to argue that just as tenants have a duty to honour landowners, humans have a duty to honour God. When tenants cannot honour landowners, they must compensate the landowner in the same way that humans must compensate God. Jesus made that compensation on our behalf. Moral influence theory believes that God does not require anything to forgive people. This theory sees atonement as more subjective and practical and tends to be espoused by liberal Christians. Penal substitution, on the other hand, tends to be espoused by conservative evangelicals. In this theory, it is the law (rather than the honour of satisfaction theory) that needs to be satisfied. Rooted in the work of Calvin and Luther, this theory assumes that God takes on the characteristics of a judge and seeks retributive justice against human sin. Jesus takes our place, receiving this retributive justice on himself.

Wu argues that biblical authors understood atonement in terms of honour and shame. He makes this argument by first examining the cultural background of biblical rituals, especially sacrifice, and the context these rituals created. Then he looks at the metaphors through which scripture describes atonement. While being 'unclean' was not considered a moral failure, refusing to become clean was. Being unclean or impure then became a 'debt and burden'. Wu argues that atonement concerned 'the problems of

impurity, debt, and burden' — in order to have a relationship with God, restitution is needed. Sacrifices served as a way to honour God by taking on someone's shame or serving as a tribute to God. Blood sacrifices represent giving one's life to God.

> Because of impurity and sin, people have an obligation or debt to fix the problem. The solution is a type of compensation or restitution. That obligation is a kind of burden to bear. If recompense is not made, one becomes worthy of punishment. (Wu 2022:156)

Therefore, Jesus' death served as a means to take away human shame, allowing us to enter into a relationship with God. Though Jesus paid restitution for us, Wu argues that his death was not punishment.

Jackson Wu, a theologian influenced by his years living and teaching in China, argues that honour and shame is the prevailing worldview of oral cultures (Wu 2015). However, like others before him, Wu describes his honour-shame atonement theory in terms of a prevailing cultural metaphor. What Wu and others describe as cultural metaphor is more akin to cultural metanarratives that inform the worldview of a culture. If one takes a canonical habitus approach to oral doctrine, then the metanarratives of a culture forms and informs the *habitus* of the culture. The biblical canon, as it replaces previously held cultural narratives, answers the same questions that the former metanarrative answered in that culture. In turn, this reshapes a cultural *habitus*. In highly relational, collectivist oral cultures, honour and shame will tend to shape the gospel story that is told. The woman in Ethiopia who reached out to Ellilta Women at Risk to escape the sex trade did not believe she was worthy to receive help. As she was later asked to describe her experience of Jesus, she told the story of Jesus forgiving rather than condemning or shaming the adulterous woman. This story became her story and informed her understanding Jesus' atonement. As she incorporated the story of atonement into her story, the biblical theme, or Kelsey's narrative logic, of honour and shame guided her understanding of atonement and forgiveness.

6.6.1.2   A Catholic Directive for an Oral Doctrine of Atonement

Although an honour-shame lens may allow for a particularly oral understanding of atonement, allowing only one form of narrative logic or one cultural metanarrative to guide doctrine risks privileging one understanding of the doctrine over others, as Vanhoozer cautions against. Again, this danger is not particular to oral theology, but oral theology, especially in regard to its canonical habitus, does require a special attention to the understanding that Christian theology does not occur in a contextual void. '*To participate in the drama of doctrine is to engage a centuries-long debate about the meaning of Scripture and how best to embody it*' (Vanhoozer 2005:450). Thus, oral doctrine cannot be a canonical habitus formed solely through the local or oral worldview. Oral doctrine must be based upon the canon as objective reality understood not only through contextual sensibility but also through catholic sensitivity.

Taimaya Ragui, a former student of Vanhoozer's, applied the canonical, contextual, and catholic principles of canonical-linguistic theology to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture in tribal communities of North East India in his PhD thesis and subsequent book (Ragui 2023). Ragui suggested that the theological interpretation of Scripture in tribal areas of North East India tends, like Shilebeeckx and Naudé above, to privilege tribal experience as 'the defining criteria of doing theology' (Ragui 2023:129). Ragui differs with this approach. He suggests retrieving tradition and doing theology in the context of catholicity provides a continuity and a corrective for tribal theology. Ragui's Theological Interpretation of Scripture is decidedly contextual theologizing rather than oral theology; however, his corrective is an appropriate reminder of the need for oral doctrine to be formed not only at the level of contextual *habitus* but also a catholic *habitus*.

Vanhoozer suggests creedal theology as a means of mediating between local theology and catholic tradition (Vanhoozer 2005:451–2). Creedal theology stabilizes

doctrinal formation. He describes creedal theology as masterpiece theatre in contrast with the local theatre of congregational theology and the regional theatre of confessional theology. Creedal theology is based upon the seven ecumenical counsels which produced creeds committed to the gospel. These creeds are foundational to correct understanding of Scripture for the universal, catholic, church. Vanhoozer defines a creed as 'an abbreviated, authorized, and adequate summary of both the biblical witness and the preaching and teaching of the universal church' (Vanhoozer 2005:449). The creeds provide doctrinal direction in light of tradition.

> To subscribe to orthodox doctrine is to engraft the local church into the life of the church universal. *The purpose of creedal theology, then, is to direct the local church into the way of the Scriptures and to relate the local church to previous great performances.* (Vanhoozer 2005:450).

In the previous section, I proposed that creeds are an expression of canonical habitus. Augustine suggested reciting the creed (thus expressing doctrine) as a means of establishing belief and bending the human will to worship. Smith argued that worship itself developed doctrine. As *habitus*, oral doctrine informs practice and is formed through practice, so creedal theology forms canonical habitus. The habitus that is formed by those creeds are expressed as either confessional theology or congregational theology. In oral theology these expressions of doctrine not only identify the local community, but the local community also identifies as a part of the universal church tradition. Participating in that tradition adds to the metanarrative of the local culture in such a way that an understanding of atonement in an oral culture might be understood through multiple lenses, including those from other cultures.

Vanhoozer's definition of creed above suggests that creeds are statements that are 'abbreviated and adequate'. Although Vanhoozer states that canonical-linguistic theology is postpropositional, he is careful to state that it not sans propositions. The creeds, as abbreviated summaries of the theo-drama, tend to be propositional statements. These statements were developed in cultures that were characterized by a high degree of orality.

In fact, some have argued that patristic theology would be the most effective form of theologizing in oral cultures (Schreiter 1985:93–6). The church fathers often used the creeds in liturgy and worship. In this way, doctrine is performed in a way that leads to understanding within canonical habitus. The challenge of the oral theologian is to access these creeds and church tradition in order to adequately express them in their own culture. As was the case with my wife and I as we partnered with Abeba, outside theologians play a pivotal role in becoming access points for the oral theologian. Schreiter postulates that this sort of conduit to tradition might be the most appropriate role of outsiders in the development of local theologies (Schreiter 1985:22–3). In current oral missiology there is a dearth of resources and study in this area. This lack of oral-friendly resources for accessing church tradition is a key gap in the development of local oral theologies.

Canonical habitus, as oral doctrine, is founded upon the reality formed by the biblical canon. *Habitus* is formed through interpretation and application of the canon, not only in local circumstances, but also in light of church tradition. This habitus is expressed in the informal-controlled stories, in liturgy and worship, and in creed proclamation. These expressions themselves form *habitus* which informs subsequent interpretations of the canon, a hermeneutical circle. Of course, regarding the oral doctrine of atonement, canonical habitus is not only the correct interpretation of the theo-drama of atonement, but it is also its embodied improvisatory performance, the *sapientia* of the doctrine of atonement.

6.6.2   Sapientia of Atonement

Vanhoozer's sapiential approach to the doctrine of atonement follows his three categories of the *sapientia* of canonical-linguistic theology in that it is prosaic, prophetic, and phronetic (Vanhoozer 2005:428–41). A canonical-linguistic approach to the theo-drama of the atonement is prosaic in that it is to be performed in everyday life. A prosaic atonement moves toward reconciliation, not only between people and God, but also in

social realms. This prosaic atonement finds its embodiment in love and forgiveness. Vanhoozer highlights racial reconciliation in the performance of atonement. This performance is prophetic in that it involves suffering as one imitates Christ. This suffering displays the kinds of sacrifices necessary for fitting participation in the cross of Christ. As the church puts to death its own social power and privilege for the sake of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is displaying a prophetic atonement to the world around it. This display of atonement may seem like folly to the world, but it is a special type of cruciform wisdom that directs the church to become the beacon of unity in a divided and angry world. The nature of the church as one body with members that span cultures, politics, and time is an embodiment of the wisdom of the cross which breaks down all barriers and leads to unity. Hope for peace in the world begins at the cross and the wisdom of the atonement. Vanhoozer's sapiential dimension of the doctrine of atonement is embodied performance as the church lives out its role in the world as "little Christs".

Vanhoozer's sapiential dimension could itself be considered an oral approach to doctrine. Oral doctrine, as canonical habitus, concerns itself with action and praxis. The praxis of the atonement in oral cultures would likely be quite similar to Vanhoozer's description above. For an example of this, I will return to this chapter's vignette.

Abeba trained groups of women in a trauma healing program. However, as she did so she was teaching and exhibiting the doctrine of the atonement. She taught the *scientia* of atonement first through the telling of a metanarrative of the overarching gospel narrative of the Bible with a theme of reconciliation between God and man. Second, she taught a specific series of biblical stories focusing on the theme of forgiveness. Third, she walked the participants through a journey of appropriating the biblical story of redemption and atonement into their own story.[35]

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[35] It is worth noting here that oral theology is not limited to the use of narrative portions of Scripture only. It happens that the example from this vignette are focused on storytelling, but non-narrative portions of

Abeba also taught the *sapientia* of the oral doctrine of atonement. First, during each session the groups started with worship and prayer focused on the theme of the day's Bible story. They then spent time listening to one another's stories. They learned and performed each Bible story, living the story as one of the characters in the story. Each session included a healing activity which grounded the truths of the story in real-life action. The group engaged with the story and the activities in discussion which moved from understanding the story to applying the story in their own lives. Finally, they would pray for one another and for the people to whom they would either share the story or apply the truth of the story. The healing and reconciliation in the families and communities of the communities were extraordinary.

The prosaic dimension of the doctrine of atonement was seen as the participants applied it to their own situations, one woman having understood forgiveness realized she had not forgiven her brother with whom she had not spoken for seven years. She went to his house, forgave him, and asked for his forgiveness. The prophetic dimension of atonement moved many of the participants to share the gospel with others and help them in their journey of healing. One man in the Eritrean refugee camps of Northern Ethiopia developed a desire to help others who had experienced the same trauma he had experienced and share with them how God helped him. This man and others developed a cruciform wisdom, the phronetic dimension of atonement in that they all desired to bring hope and healing to others.

Perhaps the strongest impact of the oral doctrine of atonement on the trauma healing groups was their strong identification as a family. To be sure, there was more at play to the development of this sense of family than the doctrine of atonement: their commitment to one another; their listening to one another; their shared experience; Abeba's leadership.

Scripture share through proverbs, songs, dance, drama, etc…are also appropriate for the development of canonical habitus.

At the same time, these other elements provided an environment in which doctrine of atonement guided their faithful improvisation which brought the community closer together. Vanhoozer seems hopeful that the atonement should bring racial and ethnic unity in the church. The case of trauma healing in Ethiopia proves that it can. Ethiopia is a country besieged by ethnic nationalism which has incited many ethnic uprisings and, most recently, civil war between ethnicities. Several of these warring ethnicities were represented in the vignette above. The fact that they refer to one another as family would be unheard of without an understanding of the power and impact of the cross. This formation of community which identifies as family is especially important to oral doctrine. Oral doctrine, as canonical habitus, not only directs appropriate belief and practice, but it also reincorporates that community into a new communal identity altogether that is grounded by the cross of Christ. For oral cultures, this may be the most significant work of doctrine, not simply directing in understanding and performance, but also engrafting the community into the body of Christ.

6.7   Conclusion

Oral doctrine is not only a tool to direct correct interpretation and application of Scripture. It forms communities of faith. Relationship and identity are at the core of those communities. Oral communities have tended to be marginalized, seen as objects of either conquest or pity. Oral doctrine does not end such oppression; however, oral doctrine that guides the oral church to take its place in the universal church brings oral believers and oral theology from the margins into body where they can both hear and be heard.

In this chapter I have argued that oral doctrine, like Vanhoozer's theatrical conceptualization of doctrine, provides direction for fitting participation in the theo-drama. Oral theologians function as doctrinal guides directing the church in faith and practice. Biblical authority in oral doctrine seems at first glance to be an impassable

problematic for oral doctrine. The issue of textual authority in oral theology seems to be compounded by the high degree of personal and communal authority in oral culture. However, I have demonstrated that personal authority of oral theologians is founded upon their understanding of the underlying metanarrative of the community. I therefore propose oral doctrine as canonical habitus in which the biblical canon forms *habitus*. As such the biblical canon has ultimate authority. This canonical authority in oral doctrine is served by communal experience, performative worship, and an interweaving of the catholic metanarrative of tradition.

Vanhoozer's directive theory of doctrine is a useful framework for conceptualizing doctrine. In introducing canonical habitus to that framework, I believe I have moved this directive theory of doctrine forward in several ways. First, in understanding canon as the outside history which forms canonical habitus, I addressed the supposed issue of Protestant orality which asks whether or not an oral culture could place authority in a text. Second, as *habitus*, oral doctrine provides a corrective for divergent or heretical theological understanding in that such heresy creates an unacceptable dissonance for orthodox canonical habitus. Third, instead of doctrine being expressed as simply a list of propositional statements, I suggest that oral doctrine might include informal-controlled stories, liturgy, worship, and creedal expressions.

Finally, I explored the doctrine of atonement as canonical habitus in light of Vanhoozer's categories. Oral doctrine understands the story of atonement in the canon through its own cultural lens; therefore, it requires a catholic lens from tradition to provide a holistic understanding of doctrine. This understanding should move toward participation in the drama of atonement through ongoing displays of forgiveness and reconciliation in the church. I referred to the vignette at the beginning of the chapter to illustrate an example of how an oral doctrine of atonement restored communities, ignited forgiveness, and created unity. Abeba is an oral theologian who guided her community

into healing through understanding and performing the biblical canon in such a way that the participants in her trauma healing groups not only understood the doctrine of atonement, but it also became such a part of them that they expressed forgiveness and love towards others. That is the essence and function of the oral doctrine of atonement.

Chapter 7: A Theodramatic Framework for Oral Theology

7.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I explored the appropriateness of Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic framework and theodramatic theology as a framework for oral theologizing. As I did so, I argued that any specifically oral framework of theology must focus on oral epistemology, cognition, and culture. This chapter will take that exploration and argument further by describing a theodramatic framework for oral theology.

As with previous chapters, I begin with a vignette. This vignette will differ from the others; instead of focusing on my own experiences with oral theo-drama, I will describe the first, and greatest, oral theologian. Next, I will briefly explain the need for a specifically oral theodramatic framework before moving on to describe the framework itself. After describing a framework of oral theo-drama, I will focus on the ways in which orality deepens or advances Vanhoozer's existing theodramatic framework, specifically focusing on canonical habitus, community, and improvisation. These advances are significant enough, I argue, to demonstrate that orality is the proper domain of theodramatics.

7.2 Jesus the Oral Theologian: A Vignette

Jesus is the most effective oral theologian. During his three years of earthly ministry, Jesus lived and ministered among largely oral peoples (Harris 1989). His own background would have been marked by orality (Keith and Allison 2013). This is evident throughout the testimony of the four Gospels. Perhaps the most helpful episode for our purpose — exploring a framework for oral theologizing — is found in the post-resurrection narrative found in the 24th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. I will re-narrate it below.

After discovering the empty tomb, Jesus' disciples were confused about what was happening. Two of the disciples, Cleopas and another unnamed disciple, decided to walk

to the village of Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem (Lk 24:13). As they started walking from Jerusalem, they discussed all the things that had happened and the testimony of those who had seen the empty tomb. As they were walking, Jesus began walking alongside them — but they did not recognize him. As Jesus walked with them, he asked them what they were talking about. They told him the story of Jesus' life, ministry, and crucifixion. They ended by describing how the women in their group had found Jesus' tomb empty, and how astounded they were by the women's story of hearing angels proclaim that Jesus was alive.

Then Jesus said to them, 'You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?' Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things about himself (Lk 24:25-7).

As they approached Emmaus, the two disciples begged Jesus to stay with them since it was getting late. He went home with them, and they sat down to eat. He took the bread and blessed it. When he handed it to the disciples, they recognized him. At that very moment, he disappeared. They looked at each other and exclaimed 'Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?' (Lk 24:32). That same hour they went back to Jerusalem.

When the two returned to Jerusalem, they met with the other disciples who had gathered. They testified that Jesus had risen from the dead, and that they had met with him on the road. As they were telling the story of how Jesus met with them, Jesus appeared in front of them all. He greeted them, but everyone thought he was a ghost. Jesus invited them to touch him to see that he really did have a body, then asked them for something to eat so he could prove he was not a ghost. The disciples were amazed.

Then Jesus said, 'When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. And he said, 'Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: "There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent." You are witnesses of all these things' (Lk 24:44-8).

7.2.1 Jesus' Oral Theological Interpretation of Scripture

'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?' (Lk 24:32). The disciples in Emmaus spoke these words after Jesus left them. Why did their hearts burn? How did Jesus explain Scriptures to them? As an oral theologian, Jesus talked with the disciples while he walked with them. He did not have them open scrolls and carefully explicate the nuances of Hebrew grammar while they dutifully took notes. He talked. Their hearts burned. Perhaps there was something about the way he explained Scripture to them that was familiar, and so they recognized the message of Jesus while not recognizing him. Perhaps the Spirit attested to the truth of Scripture and 'opened their minds' in the same way the Spirit opened the minds of the disciples in verse forty-five. Perhaps hope began to dawn within them as they realized that the theo-drama of Scripture would not end in tragedy but triumph. I believe all three were at play as Jesus re-narrated the theo-drama of Scripture and helped his disciples understand the meaning of his own death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus does the same with the disciples in Jerusalem when he appears to them in verse thirty-six. He walks them through the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms to show that (1) the promised Messiah would have to suffer and die; (2) the promised Messiah would be raised again on the third day; and (3) the message of repentance and forgiveness would be proclaimed

to all nations. Jesus used the entire canon of Scripture available to him to open his disciples' minds: the narrative of the Law (Torah); the narrative, propositions, proclamations, and poetry of the prophets; and the poetry and worship of the Psalms. Jesus used the 'writings' of Scripture as the norm for his oral theology. One might ask how Jesus using 'writings' has anything to do with oral theologizing. In chapter three, I posited an oral-performative approach to Scripture that does not exclude or renounce written Scripture. The oral-performative perspective on Scripture posits that the text of Scripture was most likely a resource for an oral performance of Scripture. In this episode, Jesus is acting in accordance with the oral-performative approach. As he explained — or more accurately, interpreted — Scripture for the two disciples on the road and later for the disciples in Jerusalem, Jesus would have "read" Scripture in the fashion of a Jewish teacher at the time. That is to say, he would have orally recited or performed the scriptural writings. As he walked along the road, he walked through the theo-drama. Jesus' approach to the written Scripture was oral in that he engaged in a sort of performance of Scripture in an embodied manner and in community.

After Jesus walked through Scriptures with his disciples, he ended by promising that they would receive the Holy Spirit, who would give them power (Lk 24:49). Chapter two of the Book of Acts shows that when the disciples did receive the Holy Spirit, the power they received allowed them to proclaim 'the mighty works of God' in other languages (Acts 2:11). Many people focus on the miracle of the Spirit enabling the disciples to speak in multiple languages. However, I contend that the equal or greater miracle is that the Spirit empowered the disciples to participate in God's communicative action by orally proclaiming their eyewitness testimony, the things that they had seen and heard. Furthermore, we see later in the chapter that Peter also shares the ongoing theodramatic impact of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection by relating the miracle of

the disciples speaking in tongues to the prophecy found in the book of Joel and retelling the story of God's theodramatic plan of salvation, which culminated in Jesus.

Jesus, the oral theologian, spoke Scripture to his disciples in an ordered manner, beginning at the beginning in order to build their understanding of the theo-drama and explain his death, burial, and resurrection as God's plan to bring forgiveness and restoration to the world. Jesus used the canon of Scripture to open the minds of his disciples and invite them to participate in the theo-drama. Finally, the Spirit enabled the disciples to participate, not only in the theo-drama, but also in God's communicative acts.

7.2.2   Jesus' Oral Theology as God in Communicative Action

Jesus revealed himself as the *dramatis persona* of God the Father's theodramatic action. God the Spirit then enabled the disciples to participate in God's revelation of himself by proclaiming God's mighty works. This eyewitness testimony ultimately resulted in the Gospels. As I posited in chapter three, these Gospels most likely existed in the form of oral testimony or oral performance before they were in written form. This approach to Scripture accords well with Vanhoozer's theodramatically-revised Scripture principle which describes Scripture as God both saying and doing something: God in communicative action. Vanhoozer's proposal of Scripture being God in communicative action provides an appropriate foundation for oral theologizing (Yoakum 2014:160–9). For Vanhoozer, Scripture is the ultimate authority in an oral theological framework, and other sources of theologizing are subject to Scripture. As such, Scripture forms the foundation for all theologizing. As with Vanhoozer's model, oral theology relies upon the canon of Scripture to provide the foundation for effective participation in the theo-drama. Scripture is the recorded script of the theo-drama — God's communicative acts throughout time and space — while also being the script that forms the basis of improvisatory participation in the theo-drama in new contexts. Although Scripture holds

the same authority in oral theology as it does in Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic framework, Vanhoozer's understanding of Scripture is the written text. This is, by definition, true; however, Scripture takes a different form and function in oral theology. I will address this question in section 7.3 below as I explore how oral theology advances Vanhoozer's model. Before I move towards these findings, I will explore Jesus' oral theology in terms of communal hermeneutics and embodied rationality.

7.2.3 Jesus' Oral Theology as Communal Hermeneutics

Jesus, as an oral theologian, walked his disciples through Scripture. He also helped them place the events of the day in the context of their own tradition, showing them that their traditional understanding of the Messiah was being fulfilled in front of their eyes. He invited the disciples into a new tradition. Oral theology, and theology in general, includes the story of how the church has made sense of their own circumstances in the light of Scripture.

For Jesus' Jewish disciples, this tradition involved looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. The Jewish people expected the Messiah to fulfil all of God's speech and action throughout history — the theo-drama. Jesus' disciples, as a part of God's covenantal people, had expected the Messiah to usher in a new (Jewish) kingdom. The disciples were eagerly awaiting their roles in this new kingdom. However, Jesus invites them to take their true roles as participants in God's communicative action as his witnesses (Lk 24:48). This role-becoming is more theodramatic than it is narrative — God's continued action in the lives of the disciples through the Spirit acts as and moves beyond the metanarrative of their lives which crafted their worldview (Wright 2013:138). In fact, Jesus practices doctrine as canonical habitus as he utilizes the canonical "Tradition" (1) to form the identity of the new covenant community, (2) to guide the

action and participation of the disciples, and (3) to reveal the true telos of the theo-drama as himself and the salvation of all of humanity.

The Jewish people had formed their own "tradition" around the "Tradition" of the theo-drama.[36] Jesus fulfils the promise of the theo-drama, and he uses Scripture to correct the "tradition" of interpretation and action formed by the Jewish community. The Jewish people were correct in understanding they were a people of God's covenant, but Jesus used Scripture to bring them into a clear understanding of what that covenant was through his self-revelation. The promise then became salvation and the forgiveness of sins, in which he then invited the disciples to participate, thus forming a new covenant community. Subsequently, as the disciples worked out this new covenant in community, they formed "traditions" by interpreting Scripture in light of Jesus' self-revelation and salvation. The testimony of how these disciples worked out how then to live fittingly accordingly to the "Tradition" within these new "traditions" eventually became a part of the New Testament canon which now serves as the "Tradition" of the theo-drama. There is no more addition to the canon of Scripture, but the theo-drama continues. Christian communities continue to work out how to live fittingly according to the canon. In a sense, the church today continues to play the same scene as the disciples on the day of Pentecost.[37] These efforts, or theodramatic improvisations, form traditions which in turn become a part of the ongoing tradition of the church. The church throughout space and time, in multiple contexts and cultures, in the Spirit continues to interpret Scripture and attempt to live fittingly within the truth of Scripture. In theodramatic terms, the community of God attempts to live fittingly through theodramatic improvisation of the biblical script. Oral theology, with its commitment to community and relationship in theologizing, is a uniquely fitting ground for such improvisation. I will address this more

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[36] I introduce Vanhoozer's concepts of 'Tradition', 'tradition', and 'traditions' in chapter four.
[37] 'In brief: we are in the same context today as the NT apostles, as ones "on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11)' (K Vanhoozer 2023, personal communication June 2023).

fully below, but before doing so, I will explore Jesus' oral theologizing through the lens of embodied rationality.

7.2.4 Jesus' Oral Theology as Embodied Theology

Jesus the oral theologian walked alongside the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. The three arrived at their destination and decided to share a meal together. When he broke the bread before they were to eat, the disciples recognized him, and he disappeared. Afterwards, when Jesus met with the disciples in Jerusalem, he proved that he was alive by eating with them. Jesus encouraged the disciples to touch him, to look at the holes in his hands and feet, and to see that he was not a ghost. These acts served as proof of his bodily resurrection, to be sure, but there is significant meaning in these events for oral cultures beyond this revelation. Jesus was alive and had a body that could be touched and could eat food. Jesus is theologizing in an embodied manner. In chapter five, I discussed embodiment and oral theology in terms of Vanhoozer's sapiential categories of prosaic, phronetic, and prophetic theologies. Jesus' theologizing in Luke chapter twenty-four and in Acts chapter two reflects these categories.

Jesus' physical embodiment, particularly his eating food, is the essence of a prosaic theology.[38] Jesus' incarnate body is the quintessential embodiment of theology into everyday language and culture. After his death, his resurrected body continues to "translate" himself into humanity.

> Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language…when Divinity was translated into humanity, he did not become generalized humanity. He became a *person* in a particular locality and in a particular ethnic group, at a particular place and time (Walls 2015:27).

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[38] Vanhoozer's discussion on prosaic theology focuses on everyday language and local culture, but physical embodiment is at the core of these concepts. A prosaic theology is first a visceral theology.

The "everydayness" of walking, breaking bread, and eating displays Jesus' continued desire to bring humanity into relationship with the triune God in a way that they could understand and accept. The disciples could touch him and eat with him. In oral cultures, the acts of touching and eating together have particular significance in both grounding theological reflection in the here and now but also in strengthening their relationships. The act of touching moves the interaction from simply words to the sort of present-presence I examined in chapter two as it relates to Kelber's oral synthesis (Kelber 1983:137). Oral discourse occurs in the present time of the speaker and hearer. They are physically present to one another. By having his disciples touch him, Jesus was verifying his physical presence with them. Beyond the act of touching, the act of sharing a meal in oral cultures is a significant communal experience. Thus, in Jesus' familiar breaking of bread with the two disciples along the road, as well as his eating in front of the disciples in Jerusalem, Jesus is re-establishing his close relationship with his disciples. He uses everyday activities as he adjusts their theological understanding. Jesus is engaging in prosaic theology.

Jesus not only meets with the disciples in-person, on the road and in a room in Jerusalem, but he also moves them to wise choices and correct action, a phronetic theology. In the case of the two disciples who chose to leave the city and (presumably) return home, Jesus changes their direction – both figuratively and literally. He first corrects their current direction of thought and theology through a careful overview of the theo-drama of Scripture along the road. He then reveals to them who he truly is, seemingly through the familiar act of breaking bread. They then literally change the direction of their journey by returning to the other disciples in Jerusalem. When Jesus appears to the disciples in Jerusalem, he moves the disciples beyond simply believing that he was alive. He shows through Scripture that he is the Messiah that had to suffer, die, and be raised again. Jesus then calls the disciples to choose to move beyond fear and hiding in a room

to boldness and proclaiming salvation to all nations. Jesus is not only concerned with the disciples' correct understanding of the theo-drama, but he also moves them to correct theodramatic action. In the same way, oral theology is just as concerned with orthopraxy, right action, as it is with orthodoxy, right belief. In fact, in the previous chapter, I explored the interconnectedness between doctrine and action. The experience of God through the Spirit leads the oral theologian to experience the world theologically. In Luke 24, the disciples are faced with theological choices. Acts chapter two shows that the disciples chose to follow Jesus' role for them and acted upon it.

In Luke 24, Jesus, the oral theologian, gives his disciples their roles to play. They are to be witnesses of the gospel, a prophetic theology. Jesus then reiterates that the Father promised to send his Spirit to them. When they received the Spirit, they would receive power to give eyewitness testimony to Jesus' resurrection as well as to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in his name. As stated above, the disciples were invited to participate in God's communicative action. They did so through spoken testimony which resulted in the salvation of three thousand people in one day (Acts 2:41). Jesus' oral theology moved the disciples to correct understanding which resulted in making wise decisions in accordance with that understanding. The result was the proclamation of the gospel, a prophetic theology. This sort of proclamation may not be unique to oral theology, but it certainly accords with oral theology in that the oral testimony of the disciples could be considered as a type of oral performance.

The Luke 24 narrative, along with Acts chapter two, illustrate Jesus' theologizing from the perspective of oral theology. This narrative is simply one indicative episode of many. Jesus' primary audience was mostly from an oral culture. In fact, the educated elite were often the object of Jesus' wrath. Jesus' preferred method of theologizing during his ministry was oral. Jesus told stories, he walked with people, he lived among them. He ate and drank with people, and he challenged them to make wise decisions and take correct

actions. Ultimately Jesus fulfilled God's theo-drama while inviting his disciples to fittingly participate in God's communicative action in the world. Jesus' theologizing was both theodramatic and oral. Oral theology is theodramatic theology. Therefore, in the following section I will explore the practical outworking of an oral theology within Vanhoozer's framework.

7.3 From Page to Stage: A Framework for Oral theology

In chapter one, I stated that this project would explore the development of a framework for oral theologizing which might provide a framework for right-living 'towards God'. In the following sections, I will posit such a framework. Furthermore, I will suggest that theologizing in a milieu of orality is the most appropriate context for Vanhoozer's model. Theologizing within an oral theodramatic framework becomes faith living understanding.

In light of this disposition towards the purpose of theology being living towards God in the real world, I have chosen to take Vanhoozer's theodramatic model as a framework, but not necessarily the language of his theatrical metaphor. Recently, members of my team tested oral hermeneutical resources among oral Bible translators in Papua New Guinea. As has been demonstrated through the course of this project, an oral approach to hermeneutics is not simply a matter of aurally presenting information. Our oral hermeneutical resource is a guided process whereby teams of translators work in community to access, internalize, and interpret Scripture through embodied practices while articulating Scripture orally. The process is both oral and theodramatic. As such I employed theatrical terminology in describing each step in the process. The second step in the process is akin to the dramaturgical process of providing the canonical, historical, cultural, and theological context of the passage. This is the step in the process in which the translators have access to the tradition of interpretation of that passage. I labelled that step in the process "Setting the Stage". As my team tested the materials, they asked for

any specific feedback from the translators. The translators said, 'Can we please change the name of the second step? We don't know what you mean by setting a stage. We do not have stages here'. The local people have a tradition of drama, but not of the theater. By this, I mean they do not have a tradition of buildings where an audience can watch a play. There are localities of dramatic enactments, but those localities have no use for vocabulary such as stage, lighting, or setting. Similarly, there is no tradition of theatre meaning the profession associated with western theatre such as the vocabulary of dramaturge, director, and acting "companies". Many cultures have a rich theatrical tradition, but many do not. In this case, the local translators will name the steps whatever they would like to name them; the content and process are most important. Similarly, I would like to bring into focus the content and process of oral theology. As such, I will move away from the language of the theatre at this point as I follow the contours of Vanhoozer's theodramatic theology. Instead, the sections below will present a framework for oral theology that focus on the categories of canon, canonical habitus, community, and improvisation.

7.3.1 The Canon

In chapter three, I explored the place of Scripture in oral theology, and I suggested an oral-performative perspective on the orality of Scripture. In this perspective, it is accepted that Scripture has both textual and oral characteristics. However, the text of Scripture was often used as mnemonic systems for oral performances of orally composed traditions or orally composed poetry, songs, and even letters. If Scripture is seen in this oral-performative perspective, then performative disciplines such as storytelling, singing, and drama could be fruitful means for the hermeneutical exploration of Scripture. Oral presentation of Scripture is then not only possible but preferable. Just as Jesus "performed" Scripture by talking his disciples through the Law, the prophets, and the

Psalms, so too may oral theologians present Scripture in oral form. In oral performance, Scripture may take the form of storytelling, song, dance, drama, or recitation; however, Scripture in oral theology takes on multiple functions and the form will tend to follow the function.

The function of Scripture in oral theology is polyvalent. As stated above, Scripture is the norming norm of theology in an oral framework just as it is in Vanhoozer's framework. At the same time, Vanhoozer relies upon access to the full canon through the text of Scripture and the reading of Scripture in his model. Oral cultures tend towards oral expressions of Scripture rather than written expressions. When speaking of the magisterial authority of Scripture in oral theology, oral cultures require access to oral expressions of the whole canon of Scripture. This is most often accomplished through audio versions of the written text of the Bible. However, the Bible translation community has recognized that an audio version of the written text does not make that version a fully oral expression of the written text. Bible translation agencies are now very intentionally translating Scripture orally in order to bring out the oral-performative characteristics inherent in the text (Maxey 2009). Having the full canon of Scripture in oral form is the desired norm for oral theology. However, it is unrealistic to assume that all oral language communities will have full access to Scripture. This is no way means that such oral communities cannot faithfully engage in oral theologizing. A precedent for such oral theologizing without Scripture might be found in the apostolic kerygma.

7.3.1.1 Oral Theologizing in the Absence of Canon: Apostolic Kerygma

Dodd sets out to uncover the key components of the central gospel proclamation among the apostles, the kerygma, through Paul's sermons (Dodd 1937:5). Paul described himself as expounding upon a foundation of fundamental beliefs — specifically 'Christ and him crucified' — and explained that his teaching derived its authority from that foundation (Dodd 1937:6). After examining Paul's sermons, Dodd concludes that Paul's kerygmatic

foundation 'is a proclamation of the facts of the death and resurrection of Christ in an eschatological setting which gives significance to the facts' (Dodd 1937:11). In other words, the kerygma was a summary of the gospel story.

Dodd proceeds to demonstrate that this evidence that Paul had a foundational kerygma supports the notion of a wider apostolic kerygma. Furthermore, the linguistic format, threads of logic, and common phrases in Paul's sermons indicate that when referencing kerygma in his sermons Paul assumed he was reiterating to his audience mutually held beliefs and drawing on commonly held formulas to communicate those beliefs (Dodd 1937:13).

Dodd outlines this kerygma in seven points: (1) The prophecies are fulfilled, and the new age is inaugurated by the coming of Christ. (2) He was born of the seed of David. (3) He died according to the Scriptures, to deliver us out of the present evil age. (4) He was buried. (5) He rose on the third day according to the Scriptures. (6) He is exalted at the right hand of God as Son of God and Lord of quick and dead. (7) He will come again as judge and savior of men (Dodd 1937:18).

Building upon Dodd's work, Messmer makes a wider argument about the compatibility between the *sola Scriptura* view and early Christian creeds, Messmer compares the text of the apostolic kerygma and the Apostles' Creed. He concludes that the two 'overlap to such a significant extent that they can be regarded as virtually identical' (Messmer 2018:373). Messmer compares this framework of components to the components in the Apostles' Creed to demonstrate that the form and content of both the kerygma and creed are the same (Messmer 2018:379). Messmer argues that since the creed so adequately summarizes Scripture, protestants who hold tightly to *sola Scriptura* can adopt the Apostles' Creed as an authoritative hermeneutical and interpretive framework (Messmer 2018:380). In turn, Messmer sees this exercise as an example of

how those who see creeds as authoritative can show to others how their creeds are rooted in the authority of Scripture (Messmer 2018:381).

The apostles and the early church did not have a full version of the canon. They relied mostly upon a common kerygma to align their theology and doctrine. As Messmer has shown, this kerygma was nearly identical to the Apostles' Creed in both form and content. He further illustrates that the creeds are rooted in Scripture. At the same time, it is worth noting that the kerygma existed before both the creeds and the Scripture. So, the creeds may have been rooted in Scripture, but both would have been rooted in the kerygma as well. I point this out, not to elevate kerygma to the same level of authority of Scripture, but to point out that there was some level of authority given to the kerygma before there was an agreed upon canon of Scripture. Thus, the early church, in an oral cultural milieu engaged in faithful and fitting theologizing in the Spirit without the existence of written Scripture. Oral churches today might also, in the Spirit, engage in faithful and fitting theologizing without the existence of written Scripture.

7.3.1.2 The place of Storytelling

Although the whole canon of Scripture in oral form is desired for oral theology, oral theological reflection can be facilitated through an understanding of the narrative of the theo-drama. As has been discussed throughout this project, oral theology and oral theologizing does not equate simply to storytelling – oral theologizing is embodied, communal, and contextual. However, just as Jesus expounded upon the story of the Jewish people in Scripture as a performance of canonical storytelling so too does oral theology rely upon a summarized telling, or performance, of the theo-drama. An overarching telling of the theo-drama operates as a sort of rule of faith that enables an oral interpretation of other parts of the canon. This summary story is a core element of oral theology. In practice, the telling of this story can be anywhere between five and thirty minutes depending upon the form of the performance and culturally established

performative styles. In other words, some formats of telling such as songs and epic-tellings can be lengthier whereas proverbial and creedal formulations tend to be shorter. This metanarrative of the theo-drama formulates the controlling narrative for oral theology. It is the story that explains all the other stories and provides the interpretive key for the non-narrative portions of Scripture.

This overarching storyline provides the backbone for a biblical theology as well as the necessary cognitive context for further theological interpretation of Scripture. The metanarrative is one controlling story, but it contains many component stories. Canonical understanding begins with metanarrative of the theo-drama and ultimately should include access to all of the canon in oral form; however, there are many stages along the way. A summarizing or overarching story can operate as a rule of faith for an oral community, but so can sets of stories from the biblical canon. These sets of stories can also serve to undergird specific doctrinal or missiological theological truths. In chapter three, Abdullah established a gospel-focused narrative by telling over 40 stories to his accusers. In chapter six, Abeba begins the healing process with seven stories spanning the creation of the universe to the return of Christ. Some oral theological educators advocate for over three hundred stories to provide a basis for a biblical theology. I teach an oral biblical theology course using one hundred stories. The number of stories told will depend on the purpose for which they are being told. The goal is to develop canonical understanding. The purpose of such a metanarrative of Scripture is similar to that of the creeds. As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the Apostles' Creed could be considered a highly abbreviated quasi-metanarrative of the theo-drama. Swain argues that such creeds introduce Scripture and set boundaries for biblical interpretation (Swain 2023:215-6). By corollary, the metanarratives described above provide a similar function in oral theology and builds canonical understanding.

Vanhoozer describes this canonical understanding in various ways: as a script, as stage lighting, and as an atlas representing the different maps of Scriptural genres. Vanhoozer is keenly interested in keeping the magisterial authority of Scripture while moving it beyond a guidebook full of rules and regulations to inviting fitting participation in the theo-drama revealed by the divine playwright himself. Thus, Vanhoozer uses the theatrical model to convey a performative approach to Scripture that not only builds knowledge and understanding, but also guides life and action. Vanhoozer's literate audience will hear his pleas. Some will reject his proposal, some will give intellectual assent, and some will be moved to action. An oral audience, however, is already inclined towards a performative approach to Scripture. By the very nature of oral communication, the canon must be orally performed in order to be understood. That performance invites participation, which moves towards transformation. Oral theology does not simply embrace Vanhoozer's performative approach to the canon. Oral theology requires a performative approach to the canon that results in fitting participation. In this way, oral theology enriches Vanhoozer's model and becomes the proper domain for theodramatic theology. The theo-drama of Scripture is the starting point of Scripture engagement. It forms and transforms community. Canonical understanding grounds this transformation in the magisterial authority of Scripture. In the following section, I will explore how oral doctrine is formed through the biblical canon and provides the structuring structure of oral theology using the concept of canonical habitus.

7.3.2   Canonical Habitus

In chapter six I argued that doctrine in oral theology forms a "canonical habitus". To briefly recap: canonical habitus draws from Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Habitus refers to the principles and tendencies that guide a particular person or community. These tendencies are shaped by that community's history and re-enforced as people act

according to that habitus. Thus, habitus functions as 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structure', and individuals tend to instinctively and unconsciously act according to habitus (Bourdieu 2010:72).

I argue that, in oral theology, doctrines are the beliefs of the church which are expressed explicitly through creeds, stories, proverbs, and songs. Doctrines are also beliefs that are shown implicitly through the characteristic canonical practices of the church. In this way, oral doctrine functions as canonical habitus. When an oral community has thoroughly embodied and practiced the biblical canon, the doctrinal teaching derived from Scripture becomes so ingrained in the community that the community and the individuals within it will tend to instinctively act according to that doctrine. A canonical habitus is doctrine that is canonically governed and canonically formed habitus. An individual will act fittingly within the theo-drama because they will unconsciously act according to the doctrine formed through their tacit or explicit canonical understanding. An individual who acts contrary to doctrine will be held to account by their wider community, who themselves instinctively understand and operate within canonical doctrine.

Canonical habitus is similar to Vanhoozer's notion of canonicity and canonical practices. Canonicity describes a person's ability to fit themselves within the wider theo-drama. Vanhoozer writes 'Canonical practices are Spirit-directed, rule-governed social-communicative activities done to some covenantal end' (Vanhoozer 2005:217). In a way, canonicity provides guardrails for a person's participation within the theo-drama because it aligns them within and holds them to the authority of Scripture. Canonical habitus takes canonicity a step further. Instead of providing guardrails for action, it is the source of action. It moves the role of scriptural authority from cognitive assent to worldview. Someone with canon-sense consciously aligns themselves according to Scripture — they are able to sense what fits within the canon and what does not. Someone with a canonical

habitus lives within the scriptural theo-drama because they view the world through the lens of scripture. Canon-sense shapes our perception of reality, canonical habitus creates our perception of reality. Oral expressions of doctrine, stories, songs, dance, drama, proverbs are formulated out of this canonical habitus.

Furthermore, while canon-sense applies both on a communal and individual level, canonical habitus necessarily involves a community. Though individuals act from habitus — and may, on occasion, act contrary to habitus — entire communities share habitus and hold one another accountable to right thinking and acting. In the case of the church, canonical habitus not only provides doctrinal direction, but it also shapes the right judgements of theodramatic fittingness through the church. The ecclesiastical community shapes and acts according to habitus established through the internalization of Scripture. The Holy Spirit forms the church and enables this internalization of Scripture. When there are disagreements regarding doctrine or interpretation, the canonical habitus of the community provides the baseline for canonical judgements. Thus, the oral community is the arena for oral hermeneutics. This was the case in Acts 15 as well as the early church councils when the early church leaders discussed doctrinal disagreements in community.

7.3.3   Community

Oral hermeneutics is an act of theodramatic reasoning that occurs within community. Theological reasoning in oral cultures is not a solitary enterprise. Oral theology is not performed by a theologian for a community, oral theology is done in community. The oral theologian acts as a conduit through which the oral community accesses Scripture and tradition, but theological reflection is done in relationship and in real-life. The physical context of the community and bodily senses of the members of the community play a role in interpretation and theologizing. In this way, the trauma healing communities in Ethiopia explored theological truth by internalizing Bible stories through dramatization

and physical activities in community. These activities lead the participants to realize they had value, they had a family in Christ, and that they could forgive others as they had been forgiven. Oral theology is a "bodied" theology which leads to communal reflection in the real world. This embodied rationality leads not only to intellectual understanding of theological truth, but it also leads to an experience of that truth in community:

> OH [Oral Hermeneutics] finds its roots in spiritual and human relationality molded and modeled after the Holy Trinity (who exists in original and fundamental relationality) as it seeks to discover truths in narrative texts through natural social connections, conversations, and the actions of characters. (Steffen and Bjoraker 2020:302)

The Spirit enables the disciple to experience the eternal communion between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit while disciples embody theological truth in the Christian community life. The Spirit also connects other believers to one another in the church. The church then becomes the locus of theological reflection and action. In Vanhoozerian terms, the Spirit enables the Christian believers to fittingly participate in the theo-drama by participating in the divine communion.

This participation in and embodiment of the theo-drama in oral theology moves towards living out theological truth in the world. The church forms the community displaying the Christian life to the rest of the world. The church is an acting troupe improvising the theo-drama on the stage of the world. The church performs theology and doctrine as it is scripted and prescribed by the biblical canon. In oral theology, canonical habitus not only provides the direction for this ecclesial performance, but it also creates the stage itself. Canonical habitus shapes the reality in which the church lives.

Amos Yong explored the communal nature of oral hermeneutics among oral communities in Africa. Yong uses orality to explore the communal dynamic in African Pentecostal hermeneutics, writing:

> . . . we can see that not only are the personal and the spiritual intermingled, but these together are also not divorced from the social and public ground. There is here a communal aspect to Pentecostal Bible reading and hermeneutics that recognizes how a scripted word of God can nevertheless address the present realities of believing communities in places and times far removed from the original utterances. Such a communal approach to and engagement with Scripture could precipitate liberative

transformation not only at a personal but also at ecclesial and even social levels, at least that is the promise of African Pentecostal communal hermeneutics. (Yong 2017:55-56)

The promised transformation to which Yong refers above is made possible through a communal approach to oral theology in which the reality of the theo-drama is the basis for addressing the present realities of the interpretive community. Through a communal approach to theology facilitated by canonical habitus, oral faith communities connect to the community of faith that has been interpreting and applying Scripture throughout the ages. Oral ecclesial communities become a part of and participate in the ongoing tradition of the church.

Oral cultures highly value tradition. Tradition in oral cultures create and strengthen the community. As such, oral theology would rely upon church tradition as much or more than other theological frameworks. Unfortunately, there is very little oral access to global church tradition. Much work has been done to provide oral expression of Scripture; however, tradition and the hermeneutical tradition of the global church still seem to be imprisoned in highly academic treatises and commentaries. There are, of course, glimpses into church tradition through the ritual of liturgical churches and confessions, but more is needed.

A local framework of oral theology would include culturally appropriate liturgical practices that provide oral cultures with connection with church tradition. In chapter six, Swami Mukhtanand gives an excellent example of such a culturally appropriate liturgical practice. He leads his congregation in the ultimate community-creating practice, the taking of the eucharist. He does so by using the culturally appropriate symbols from the flesh and milk of the coconut. Thus, the oral theologian provides connection without abandoning culturally appropriate forms. Swami Mukhtanand provides the narrative context for the ritual and moves the congregation to consider the biblical meaning of eucharist while sharing the story of how the Christian tradition has not only celebrated but interpreted the ritual throughout history. Church history in oral theology is taught

through ritual, story, and even song. Oral theology requires narrative and visual commentaries that tell the story of how the church has interpreted Scripture and how those interpretations guided their thought and action. Oral commentaries provide discussion and dialog with historical interpretation of Scripture so that local interpretative communities may have access to the wisdom of their forefathers in the faith. Songs like those of the Lisu, proverbs like those of the Builsa, and even the oral prayers of the Karamojong provide the connection with church tradition required in oral theologizing. These are all forms of oral commentary. At present, no comprehensive oral commentary on the whole of Scripture exists. This gap creates worrisome potential for interpretive communities to fall into syncretism and heresy. There are efforts underway to fill this gap. In the meantime, oral communities rely upon access to textual resources and human "conduits" of tradition. This is not to say that an oral framework for theologizing is not possible in the present. However, oral theology is in need of oral tools that follow oral processes of oral hermeneutics in order to faithfully and fully participate in the theo-drama.

The question then still remains: how might oral theology handle disagreement? Oral cultures highly value relationships and community, but this is not to say that oral communities or churches live within a utopic ideal where there is no disagreement or quarrel. Church history provides ample evidence of such disagreement. In some instances, the disagreements led to splintering and fracturing of the church. In other instances, these disagreements have led to theological clarification and the strengthening of the church. Olson gives an excellent overview of these moments of clarification and strengthening in his *The Story of Christian Theology*.

> … the story of Christian theology is not a story of ivory-tower professional thinkers dreaming up obscure and speculative doctrines to confuse simple Christian believers. Without denying that something like that may have happened from time to time in Christian history, I wish to counter that popular image by showing here that every major Christian belief arose for pressing, practical reasons. (Olson 1999:15)

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These moments of clarification in the early church came in the form of the great counsels and creeds. Today, much of theological debate happens through the exchange of written treatises through journals or online forums. There are in-person consultations, but the format of these consultations tends to still resemble written discourse. Papers are presented and afterward formal responses are given rather than the lively exchange of oral discourse. This type of theological debate is good and appropriate in an academic context. however, it bears little resemblance to the life-on-life discourse of oral theologizing.

When disagreements arise in oral theology, the community relies upon the resources available to them the to make fitting judgements. First, much like the early church, disagreements in oral theology happen in the context of the community. Even disagreements between individuals are seen in light of the community as a whole. Oral cultures value communal harmony, so individual disagreements that jeopardize that harmony become an issue for the community as a whole. As such, differences of doctrinal interpretation are brought to the community in much the same way that the early church convened councils. In the case of oral communities, every person has the right and obligation to share their understanding. The first port of call for interpreting Scripture in oral theology is the rule of faith, the metanarrative of the theo-drama, often encapsulated in story or song. This overarching story provides the interpretive framework for other interpretations. Oral theologians engage first in the canon in order to interpret the canon. These discourses tend to take the form of stories, songs, and proverbs that reflect the agreed canonical habitus of the community. This reflects the community's canonical understanding.

When disagreement remains, the oral theologian provides the historical context of the Scripture and how the catholic, universal, church has interpreted the canon. In chapter six, I discussed the role of the oral theologian in Vanhoozer's concept of a dramaturge whose role was to give doctrinal direction. The dramaturge, or in this case the oral

theologian, provides direction by showing how the church throughout history has interpreted the canon of Scripture. These directions are often provided in the form of proverbs, prayers, songs, or stories. This provides catholic understanding. Local cultures may agree upon their interpretation of the Scripture using the canon and tradition. In fact, if a community has developed a canonical habitus, it is unlikey that any disagreement that involves the gospel would be allowed by the community. The theo-drama forms a perception of reality in such a way that beliefs that do not accord with the gospel would cause such dissonance that they could not be entertained. Other beliefs that do not jeopardize the perception of reality created by canonical habitus can be judged by how the church community throughout history has addressed the issue. The local ecclesial community, as a part of the global church community, will tend to accord with traditional interpretations. This approach assumes that the local oral community identifies with one particular church tradition. There are, of course, many church traditions. This creates some confusion as to what tradition of interpretation might be followed, particularly as oral churches, like other churches, do not exist in a vacuum — denominational identities do exist in oral communities. A theological framework which creates a truly ecumenical oral church is beyond the scope of this project.

Of course, there are theological issues that are addressed neither by the canon of Scripture nor by church history. There may be disagreement on how to interpret these issues in a particular time and in a particular cultural context. This requires cultural understanding. In oral theology, canonical habitus forms the worldview of the Christian community, but the stories, rituals, and customs of the culture color the expression and participation of the church community. For this, I turn to the concept of improvisation in oral theology.

7.3.4 Improvisation

Canonical habitus is formed by the canon of Scripture and relies heavily on the interpretive communities of the local and catholic church. However, canonical habitus is not only concerned with correct interpretation, but it also guides right action. In oral theology, this right action is the improvisation of the canonical habitus. The canon is the foundation of oral theology. The community is the locus of oral theology. Improvisation is the active participation in the theo-drama of the canon in community. In order to place the role of improvisation in oral theology, I will return to Anglican theologian Samuel Wells' seminal work on theodramatic improvisation: *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Wells 2018b).

Wells argues that we should consider performance the embodiment of the Christian story and improvisation the type of performance required for such embodiment. To build this argument, Wells first describes the literature that describes performance as a viable option for understanding Christian life. He describes different ways different theologians have imagined performance, hinting at some of the shortfalls in those imaginations. Nicholas Lash understood Scripture as the script that the church performs in the same way that the Constitution is the script that American society performs. The church should continue to perform the same story encased in the Scriptural script. Lash does not, however, adequately answer how the church should respond when faced with situations for which the script does not give a clear answer. Like Lash, Walter Brueggemann sees the Christian life as a drama acted out. Brueggemann envisions the script as 'one that can be rendered in a variety of ways' but misses the communal aspect of Christian life and fails to answer how such a community might answer questions that the script does not clearly answer (Wells 2018:40). Wells points to Vanhoozer's speech-act theory as taking the concept of performance further by 'underlining the communicative dimension to the drama' that shows how the script is the communicative act of God through which he

invites its readers to enter his story by performing the script in their own time and place (Wells 2018:41). But even Vanhoozer's conception of performance, according to Wells, misses a dimension of dramatic performance.

In order to get closer to that missing dimension, Wells briefly considers moving from performance to Shannon Craigo-Snell's concept of rehearsal. In rehearsal, the script is embodied and communal as 'interactions are practiced and perfected, words are filled with action and the silences between them filled with significance, when text is given body, voice, and character' (Wells 2018: 42). But rehearsal is still too closely related to performance and falls into the same pitfalls. Performance implies a community closely following a set script. If we assume Scripture as the script of Christian life, then performance of the script does not adequately cover every aspect of Christian life because Scripture does not have exact answers for every circumstance that might arise. Performance of a script also implies that there is a 'golden era' that the church might return to by adequately performing the script, or it hints that the church should disengage with the world in order to more closely perform the script. Finally, it implies that the script encapsulates the entire story of the church, ignoring the ongoing story that the church continually engages. Wells predicts that a church attempting to carefully perform a script might follow one of three paths: it might live in the past by rigidly following the script; it might dismiss the script as too rigid and thus set all or aspects of scripture aside; or it might inadequately transpose the script into contemporary motifs that draw the church away from the heart of Scripture.

Thus, Wells proposes a move from performance to improvisation. Improvisation is the type of performance that most accurately describes how the church community embodies the script. Improvisation, Wells argues, is inevitable, scriptural, and ecclesiastical (Wells 2018:45). It is inevitable because the church always improvises answers to problems that have no direct correlation to scripture. It is scriptural because

we see the early church improvising throughout the book of Acts. And it is ecclesial because it focuses on the church's role in allowing church communities to encounter and realize script and tradition under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. These aspects of improvisation allow it to move further than mere performance. Unlike performance, improvisation allows the church to answer any question that arises in church life, to live rooted in the script but able to respond to and engage with the world in the present moment, and to participate in the ongoing story of Christian life.

Wells also anticipates potential arguments against improvisation and begins to answer them. Some might fear that improvisation is too original, stepping outside the bounds of the script — Wells points out that within the world of theatre improvisation requires actors to always "be obvious" and draw from the action around them and the trust they have built with each other and their audience. In the same way, a church's improvisation is never original, but rather "obvious" and rooted in the script, or in our terminology, canonical habitus. Others might consider improvisation elitist, reserved only for trained and talented improvisors. Wells responds that good improvisers are merely those who have such trust in each other and such a common understanding of their material that they can improvise effortlessly. Finally, some might consider improvisation potentially demonic or, at the other extreme, too trivial. Wells responds that though improvisation does rely on a community instinctually and unconsciously drawing on the script, that instinct is rooted in the script, guided by the Holy Spirit, and clearly articulated. Finally, Wells dismisses the assumption that improvisation is too trivial and self-indulgent for Scripture by pointing out that its source, the script, is far from solemn. He writes, 'The church can afford to take the risk of the humorous and ephemeral, because the joke is God's, and the laughter is divine' (Wells 2018:49).

Improvisation does not throw out the script or lessen its importance. Instead, Wells envisions a community so thoroughly familiar with and trained in the script that 'they

learn to act from habit in ways appropriate to the circumstance' (Wells 2018:45). Wells' improvisation only works if a community is so deeply rooted in the script that they can draw from it unconsciously and they tend to act in accordance with it.

This rootedness or grounding in the script that Wells describes as key to improvisation is canonical habitus. Canonical habitus *requires* the internalization and wholesale acceptance of the biblical canon. As habitus, the canon governs the behavior of Christian disciples as they attempt to live wisely according to Scripture. This wise living is a matter of accepting the offers from God to participate in the theo-drama. Vander Lugt posits that such improvisation requires a receptive disposition he calls disponibility (Vander Lugt 2016:34). For Vander Lugt, theological improvisation requires disponibility towards the theo-drama, church tradition, and the cultural context in which one is improvising. Similarly, oral theology is a matter of disponibility towards canon, community in tradition, and community in cultural context. Oral improvisation, however, relies upon canonical habitus to create the community's disponibility. So canonical habitus both forms and informs theological improvisation.

Wells' conceptualization of improvisation moves beyond Lash, Brueggemann, Vanhoozer, and Craigo-Snell by incorporating context, community, and drama to move beyond simply performing the script of the biblical text to move improvisation to the stuff of which theology is made — faith living understanding. Wells makes an argument that theodramatic theology is most appropriately actualized through improvisation. I argue that oral theology is the most appropriate domain for this theodramatic improvisation. Oral theology's reliance upon canonical habitus to provide the instincts that govern behavior based on the theo-drama as it is found in the canon of Scripture provides the solution to the question about what exactly is being performed and what rules govern the improvisation. Oral theology's commitment to community and relationship provides the affective, cognitive, circumstantial, and relational disponibility for effective

improvisation. So, what then counts as effective or, more appropriately, fitting oral theodramatic improvisation? To answer that question, I return to the vignette in chapter two of this project.

In chapter two, I introduced King Atchiba. One of King Atchiba's roles was to provide correct judgments. However, the judgements he made were not products of his own will or whimsy. His wisdom stemmed from a long-standing apprenticeship to the tradition of his culture. When King Atchiba began to hear the stories from the Bible, he incorporated those stories into his own communal repository of wisdom. In fact, as *gajagileeka* — God's conversation, or communication — the biblical stories took precedence over his embedded cultural stories. They formed a canonical habitus. The stories were also becoming a part of the wide communal habitus as they played on the community radio station and were discussed in homes such as Madam Gomon's. Everyone knew the stories.

When there was disagreement in the village, the whole community arrived at the king's house. This was not a doctrinal disagreement and the community at the time was not a church, but the process is still relevant. The whole community had a chance to share their stories and their positions. Once everyone had a chance to share, King Atchiba told the story of the creation of the world. This story referred the community back to the primacy of God the creator and of the importance of themselves as a community. This reminder in story form triggered understanding by relating the current event of the day to the canonical habitus that the community had begun to form through listening to the stories. This in turn created disponibility within the community, one towards the other, and resulted in peace. The theodramatic improvisation in this episode is seen in Atchiba's use of the biblical story as well as the resulting change of actions on the part of the warring parties. Not all theological disagreements are akin to warring parties, but in oral theology, as in the vignette, canon forms canonical habitus, creates community, and guides fitting

theodramatic improvisation. This improvisation embodies the canonical habitus, leading to fitting participation in the theo-drama.

7.4 Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have explored the extent to which Vanhoozer's theodramatic model might provide a framework for oral theology. Oral theology maps closely to Vanhoozer's theodramatic proposal. God in communicative action offers salvation through the gospel. Theodramatic theology is concerned with the covenant community of God fittingly participating in the theo-drama both in God's communicative action and theodramatic improvisation. I utilized Vanhoozer's framework to illustrate the practical outworking of an oral theological framework: the oral performance and internalization of the biblical canon leads to canonical habitus which forms the community of God and governs that community's theodramatic improvisations. Canonical habitus in oral cultures provides the answer to both what is being improvised as well as what guides the improvisation. This improvisation is effected within community. Oral cultures are committed to community in a deeper and richer fashion than Western or text-based cultures. As such, the communal hermeneutic of theodramatic theology is not only appropriate for oral theology, but the communal aspect of oral theology moves theodramatic theology beyond the metaphor of a theatrical company working together to improvise upon a script. Oral communities are deeply committed to one another. The community is the locus of embodied epistemology, oral performance of Scripture, and theodramatic improvisations in oral theology. Vanhoozer's theodramatic proposal is concerned with communities living out their faith under the authority of Scripture. Oral theology's framework of canon, community, canonical habitus, and improvisation provide the most effectual outworking of Vanhoozer's proposal. In other words,

Vanhoozer's model is an appropriate framework for oral theology, and oral theology is the most proper domain for theodramatic theology.

Chapter 8: A Conclusion and a Beginning

8.1 Introduction

Vanhoozer's theatrical model upholds the authority of Scripture while imploring theology to move beyond the page. The theodramatic model encourages participation and performance, which results in transformation. As I argue throughout this project, a particularly oral theodramatic model moves beyond the text and into real life. I began this project by asking: 'How might the theatrical model provide a framework for oral theologizing?' I believe that not only have I shown that the theatrical model provides oral theologizing a conceptual framework, but that oral theologizing in turn deepens and advances the theatrical model. This conclusion will recapitulate this project and point us towards new oral theological horizons. I will do so by first briefly sketching out a story of Christian expression, how theodramatic theology advances that expression, and how oral theology advances theodramatics. Next, I will answer the question of why oral theology is important to theodramatic theology by describing how the theodramatic model gives oral theology voice and oral theology gives theodramatics depth. While I believe that orality is uniquely suited to theo-drama and that theo-drama fulfils its promise when considered through an oral lens, I ask what might happen if we consider more theological systems, doctrines, hermeneutics, and missiology — all the aspects of living rightly within God's story — through the lens of orality. What might happen if we invite oral theologians to bring oral perspectives to the discussions of the larger church?

8.2 The Story Thus Far: A Vignette

Andrew Walls tells the story of Christian history in six 'phases'. Each phase covers a particular time and culture, and Walls argues that: 'Each phase represents its embodiment in a major culture area which has meant that in that phase it has taken an impress from that culture'(Walls 2015:16). Christianity's ability to be transmitted cross-culturally and

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to adapt to new cultures has allowed it to survive across centuries. Walls identifies elements of Christianity that find expression no matter the phase: (1) the worship of the God of Israel, (2) the recognition of the ultimate significance of Christ, (3) the knowledge that God is active among the believers, (4) the acknowledgement of a people of God transcending time and space (Walls 1996:24-25). Though such commonalities beat at the heart of Christianity, each cultural and temporal phase has left an imprint on the expression of Christianity.

The story of Christianity starts with Judaism and the Jews, who did not see themselves as part of a new religion but as fulfillers of the old. This begins the first phase of Christianity, a phase that solidified Christianity's Jewish roots. But in order to spread the Good News beyond the Jews, those first Jewish Christians changed the religious language they used and opened up their expression of faith beyond Jewish tradition. This quickly ushered in the Hellenistic-Roman phase of Christianity, a phase which imprinted the religion with codified orthodoxy. As Christianity grew within the Roman empire, it contended with the 'total system of thought' that characterized that empire's Hellenistic-Roman culture. 'The result,' Walls writes, 'was orthodoxy: logically expounded belief set in codified form, established through a process of consultation, and maintained through effective organization' (Walls 2015:19).

When the Roman empire fell, Christianity had to cross the cultural gap between Hellenistic Rome and the conquering Barbarians. As it entered its Barbarian phase, Christianity became a 'new creation' located not in a ruling empire but in the peasant, tribal communities that accepted it. This communal, grass-roots Christianity engendered the idea of 'a Christian nation', which in turn allowed the Church to draw parallels between itself and the historical Israel (Walls 2015:20).

Europe changed over the centuries, smoothly transitioning Christianity from its Barbarian phase to its Western Europe phase. Though this phase encompassed the

Reformation, which changed both Protestant and Catholic understandings of Christianity, it was characterized both by the domination of Western Europe over most of Christian expression and by the development of a focus on individual, rather than communal, salvation (Walls 2015:21).

As Europe expanded, so did Christianity. That brought Christianity into its fifth phase, a phase that saw both the recession of Christianity among Europeans and the 'cross-cultural transplantation' of Christianity into non-European nations by westerners. Finally, the fifth phase gave way to the sixth, the Cross-Cultural Transmission phase of Christianity. This is the phase in which we currently find ourselves. Walls predicts that in this phase churches in the Global South will dominate Christian expression and leave on it their own impressions (Walls 1996:24).

8.3   The Canonical-Linguistic Turn

While George Lindbeck's three classifications of theological theories do not map neatly onto Walls' phases of Christian expression, they are a good starting place to understand the background of the current project. Lindbeck describes three general types of theological theory: cognitive-propositional, experiential-expressive, and cultural-linguistic (Lindbeck 1984:2). The first of these theories, the cognitive-propositional, focuses on religious theories rooted in propositional statements about religious truth and doctrine. Such theories treat truth as an objective reality that can be verbally expressed and codified — cognition creates propositional religious expression (McGrath 1997:15). The second category, experiential-expressive theories, describes religious theories that are 'noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations' (Lindbeck 2009:2). Such theories prioritize inner religious experience and view religion and doctrine as manifestations of such experience — inner experience creates outer religious expression.

Lindbeck critiques both the cognitive-propositional and experiential-expressive categories. He argues that cognitive-propositional theories are too literal, intellectual, and inflexible. On the other hand, he argues that experiential-expressive theories are overly individualistic and unprovable, and 'treat doctrine as dealing with ubiquitous prereflective private experience common to all religions' (McGrath 1997:22). Lindbeck proposes a third category, the cultural-linguistic approach to theology. Such an approach views doctrine as the "language" that guides human behavior. In this theory, doctrine serves as the "grammar" that guides religious language. The "grammar" is guided by the culture in which the doctrine is found. Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic turn critiques Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach for veering too far into cultural relativity. The canonical-linguistic turn moves towards a model of embodied theological truth that still holds to scriptural authority (Vanhoozer 2005). However, if we assume we are in Walls' sixth age, in which the global south will imprint Christian expression, then the needs of oral theology should be at the forefront of theological reflection and method. Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic turn is a necessary advance in contextual theology. Vanhoozer's model provides an appropriate framework for oral theology. At the same time orality enhances and enriches Vanhoozer's model in a way that may bring us further into how Christian expression may be shaped within Walls' sixth age. For, a theology in the sixth age,

> (…must also take account of the extent to which oral cultures remain oral, and respond to Scripture orally, even when they possess literature.) The measure of their effectiveness is how far the Word once more recognizably takes flesh in the cultures in which they work, and people behold *His* glory under human conditions (Walls 2015:42).

8.4   How Does Oral Theology Deepen and Enhance Theodrama?

During the course of this project, I found that the theodramatic framework provides useful language and categories for oral theology. Because orality is also deeply relational, embodied, participatory, and communal, the theodramatic framework interacts particularly well with oral theology.

In chapter two I proposed that the theodramatic framework of Vanhoozer's model offers potential as a method for oral theologizing. Shifting the focus from narrative to drama in oral theology provides a comprehensive approach that encompasses the complexities of lived experiences within a community. While challenges such as access to Scripture and doctrinal disagreements exist, the theodramatic framework invites relational, embodied, participatory, and communal theological reflection while overcoming the lyric and epic pitfalls of traditional theological methods.

In chapter three, I explored the place of Scripture in oral theology. I proposed a new perspective for viewing the orality of Scripture. An oral-performative approach to Scripture, drawing on Vanhoozer's theodramatics, offers a robust theological framework for engaging with the oral nature of Scripture. It recognizes the inherently performative nature of the biblical text itself while honoring the orality of the original authors and audience. This new category for the oral-performative nature of Scripture aligns with Vanhoozer's approach to Scripture as God in communicative action. Scripture is the self-revelation of the Triune God, aimed at redemption and the formation of a covenant people. Vanhoozer's revised Scripture principle in which the biblical canon is not the only source of authority in theology but is the magisterial authority provides the foundational principle of oral theology.

Although Scripture is the ultimate authority in oral theology, chapter four describes oral theology as being fundamentally communal. Theological reflection takes place in the context of shared relationships and experiences. Oral theologizing is not focused on individual knowledge, but in communal engagement with Scripture which cultivates relationships that reflect and embody the theodrama. In this way, oral theology is the most consistent form of theodramatic theology. I bring up this postulate in chapter four, but I explore it more fully in chapter seven. Communal oral theology is guided by Vanhoozer's canonical, catholic, and contextual principles. Canonical understanding situates

interpretation within the larger theodrama of Scripture, recognizing its place as a coherent and interconnected whole. Catholic understanding situates interpretation within the larger faith community throughout history. In this way oral theology engages the wisdom and theological insights of the global Christian community in which voices of the past and present inform the interpretation of Scripture. Lastly, contextual understanding dialogs with the local interpretative community. By considering the specific cultural, social, and historical context in which the community exists, oral theologians can develop interpretations that are relevant and meaningful in their immediate context.

Chapter five proposes that oral theology is a dynamic and embodied form of theological engagement that transcends mere intellectual knowledge. It finds expression through cultural practice and worship, allowing believers to embody their faith. Vanhoozer's categories of sapiential theology provide a theological framework for understanding the dimensions of embodied oral theology. Oral theology is thus prosaic in that it is embedded in a particular socio-cultural context. Oral theology is phronetic in that it is concerned with making right theological judgements. Oral theology is prophetic in that is it the performative expression of theological truth. By pursuing wisdom and performative understanding, oral theology guides disciples towards fitting participation in the theodrama. This wisdom is attained through faith seeking performative understanding, where theology extends to active participation in the theodrama by embodying theological truth and integrating beliefs and practices into a coherent whole.

In chapter six, I introduced the concept of canonical habitus as a foundation for oral doctrine. Similar to Vanhoozer's directive theory of doctrine, canonical habitus provides guidance for the fitting participation in the theo-drama. It addresses the challenges of biblical authority within oral theology, acknowledging the personal and communal authority prevalent in oral cultures. By grounding the personal authority of oral theologians in the underlying metanarrative of the biblical canon, the principle of *sola*

scriptura is preserved. Oral theologians do not operate individually. The milieu of theologizing in oral theology is the oral interpretive community. Canonical habitus guides interpretation and action of oral communities. Doctrine as canonical habitus is the reality in which oral communities theologize. Furthermore, expressions of oral doctrine are not limited to propositional statements; it encompasses informal controlled stories of Scripture, liturgy, worship, and creedal expressions. The vignette of Abeba's trauma healing groups exemplified an oral approach to the doctrine of atonement which can restore communities, ignite forgiveness, and foster unity. Participants not only comprehended the doctrine, but they also embodied it, enacting forgiveness, and love towards others. Vanhoozer describes theo-drama as a continual and canonical improvisation of the biblical script. Through canonical habitus, oral theology provides guidance that integrates personal and communal authority within the framework of the biblical canon.

While Vanhoozer's theodramatic model provides oral theology with a conceptual framework, oral theology in turn deepens and, in some cases, advances theo-dramatic theology. Oral theology deepens the theodramatic commitment to Scripture through oral engagement and internalization which creates canonical habitus. This habitus in turn provides the structure and guidance for fitting theodramatic improvisation in real life. Oral theology's commitment to embodiment in relation to epistemology, social relations, and real-world interaction makes oral theology the proper domain of theodramatic improvisation. This improvisation is grounded through canonical habitus and happens in community. Oral cultures are by nature and often by necessity intensely communal. Decisions, interpretations, and judgements are made in community. Oral theology's intrinsic communal and relational nature enhances and enrichens Vanhoozer's model. Vanhoozer's model could provide a framework for theology in the global church in Walls' sixth age. At the same time, oral theology speaks nuance into that system, making

it concrete and workable for the oral majority who comprise those churches. Perhaps the sixth age is preparing for an "oral turn" in theology.

8.5   What is Next?

If there is to be an oral turn in theology, it will need to be worked out within oral communities. I began this project with a goal of providing a voice to the many extraordinary oral theologians I have known over the years. I wanted to validate their method of theology in the eyes of traditional theological method. I now know that the church, in the global south or in the global north, needs to learn from and be impacted by oral theology. I once wanted to invite Atchiba, Abdullah, Swamiji, and Abeba to the theological table. I realize now that they need to be in the theological kitchen choosing and preparing the meal. I am not sure what that looks like, but it seems to me that it cannot look like it currently looks, well-meaning academics (or PhD candidates) writing theological treatises. This new phase is likely to look more like the ages of the church councils in which the church gathers to address specific issues in robust oral discourse. It will likely require traditional theologians from various backgrounds to move towards oral theologians to learn how they "do" theology in oral contexts.

One example of this is shared by Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong in his *The Hermeneutical Spirit*. Yong studied the hermeneutics of two oral African cultures. As a result, he posited that this sort of oral hermeneutics could be a model for a '21st century Pentecostal paradigm for hermeneutics (Yong 2017:57). He outlines three interrelated facets of a Christian hermeneutic: orthopathy, orthopraxy, and orthodoxy. He demonstrates how these facets work and interact by applying them to the story of the day of Pentecost. We can connect Yong's three hermeneutical facets to oral theo-drama through embodiment, improvisation, and canonical habitus.

Yong's first criteria for Pentecostal hermeneutics is orthopathy, or right feeling, refers to 'concerns of the heart, which in religious language connotes what is central to human embodiment' (Yong 2017:57). Orthopathy, then, is central to embodiment. Yong himself points this out as he describes the orthopathy of Pentecost, writing: 'The point is that the pentecostal message was not only heard, although it surely was, but also perceived and experienced in and through human bodies' (Yong 2017:58).

Orthopraxy, or right action, refers to 'right actions, behaviors, and agency'. Orthopraxy connects to phronesis and improvisation; Yong describes orthopraxy as language that acts on the world and effects change. Pentecost, he points out, sets in motion a Spirit-guided narrative continually acted out by the church. He writes, 'the Acts narrative continues after the final 28th chapter so that each successive generation write out a new 29th chapter of the ongoing story of the mission of God' (Yong 2017:59).

Finally, orthodoxy, or right belief, refers to 'right beliefs and confessions'. Yong points out that such belief and confession tends to stem from interactions and encounters with God that shape the 'human being-in-the-world'. He describes how Peter expressed orthodoxy in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost — a sermon which drew on both oral scripture and the disciples' own encounters with Jesus (Yong 2017:60). Thus, orthodoxy connects with canonical habitus, because canonical habitus guides communities into right beliefs and confession and is the source from which communities draw those beliefs and confessions.

Yong's appropriation of oral theology into his hermeneutic advances his argument for a Pentecostal hermeneutic which is storied, embodied, founded on right beliefs, and leads to right action. I have applied orality to Vanhoozer's model. In so doing, I discovered that oral theology is the most consistent form of theodramatic theology. This potential oral turn might move theology from the page to the stage to real life.

Faith living understanding is not simply performance. In fact, it moves beyond theodramatic improvisation. Faith living understanding is built upon the instincts and behaviors created and guided by canonical habitus. Habitus is concerned with life and living. The canon informs us of the reality in which we live. Faith living understanding is about living with others with all the commensurate suffering, pain, joy, and triumphs that life affords in that reality. Living is a dangerous yet joyous enterprise – so too is the faith living understanding of oral theology. The faith community lives life with one another. They are formed as a people in the power of the Spirit through their participation in the communion of the triune God in communicative action thereby experiencing a joyous communion with one another. Faith living understanding moves beyond a troupe performing on a stage to real-life, sometimes sharing in pain, other times sharing in joy – at all times living in the expectation of Jesus' triumphant return. Oral theology embraces theological understanding which leads to 'living towards God'. Oral theology is faith living understanding – faithfully, creatively, contextually, and communally.

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