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# Performing the Bible in the Korean Context: Korean Ways of Reading, Singing, and Dramatizing the Scriptures

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**Abstract:** The present study explores the performative nature of the Bible as a sacred text in the Korean context. Drawing on the theory of scriptural performance advocated by James W. Watts, I investigate its character as *words* and *contents*. First, I delve into the scriptural performance of thoroughly reading (and listening to) the Bible at the level of words. Second, I scrutinize the scriptural performance of singing and dramatizing the Bible at the level of contents. The specific context of South Korea—whether religious, cultural, or social—alerts us to the performed transformation of the semantic range of the long-standing Christian tradition. Given the cultural differences between Western and Eastern Christianity, I contend that the adaptation of Christianity to Korean soil renders the performative dimension of the scriptures all the more semantic. In other words, the Korean ways of performing the Bible are essentially deeply rooted in those of signifying it. In the long term, Christianity turns out to be such a global religion that it provokes a more complex analysis of its scriptural performance in its widely differing range of semantics.

**Keywords:** Korean Christianity; Bible; scriptures; performance; semantics; *Tongdok*; *Pansori*; bibliodrama

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## 1. The Three Dimensions of the Scriptures in Korea

The present study aims to explore the performative nature of the Bible as a sacred text in the context of Korean Christianity (cf. [Smith 1971](#)). Undoubtedly, Christianity in the Korean Peninsula has been shaped by the great influence of Western culture. However, it would be too hasty to consider the history of Korean Christianity as merely western. Rather, a closer look would show that it has been clothed in Korean traditions as it has developed. In the words of Tail Il Wang, Korean churches have been more interested in religious experience rather than doctrinal understanding through the process of performing the scriptures ([Wang 2009](#)). With this in mind, I would like to pay special attention to the aspect of Korean Christianity as it pertains to the performance of the Bible in contemporary South Korean society. It is my contention that the performative aspect of the Bible in the Korean context has some bearing on its semantic features.

To this end, I draw on the theory of James W. Watts regarding the three dimensions of scriptures: semantic, performative, and iconic ([Watts 2006](#), pp. 140–43). Let us discuss what is meant by each dimension for the moment. First, in Watts' words, the semantic aspect concerns the process of interpreting the meaning of written text in a religious community (p. 141). For instance, preaching is an attempt to deliver the semantic meaning of the Bible to a congregation; a preacher plays a significant role as an exegete in such a way as to derive meaning from the given text.

Next, the performative aspect deals with the performance of written text (cf. [Austin 1975](#), pp. 141–42). Watts is correct to divide the performative dimension into two ways on the assumption

that the scriptures are performed at the level of *words* and *contents*. On the level of words, scriptures can be read, recited, or memorized in private or public settings. On the level of contents, scriptures can be illustrated in the form of arts. To illustrate, scriptural performance as words can be found in the act of reading through the Bible as part of a ritual or otherwise. On the other hand, scriptural performance as contents appears in the form of song, drama or cinema. In the process, the performance of the Bible as words is conventionally under the authority of religious leaders, while the performance of the Bible as contents is contingent on the creativity of the artist (pp. 141–42).

Lastly, the iconic aspect touches on the symbolic representation of scriptures (pp. 142–43). As Watts explains, religious people have a keen desire to make scriptures ostensibly distinguishable from other secular books in concrete terms. Probably the best example of iconic scripture can be found in a well-embellished Bible with regard to its color, size, and/or substance. Specifically, a black, large, or leather-bound Bible symbolically conveys the significance of the Bible as a sacred text. Displaying a large Bible on a podium gives weighty meaning to ritual by emphasizing its unparalleled importance as a sacred text.

In recent years, there arises a new tendency to reexamine the Bible from the vantage point of performance studies. Terry Giles and William Doan adamantly suggest that some of the materials in the Hebrew Bible were vibrantly recited in front of an audience (Giles and Doan 2008, p. 273). Likewise, David Rhoads reconstructs the New Testament writings as records of “performance literature—either as transcriptions of prior oral compositions or as written compositions designed for oral performance” at a communal level (Rhoads 2006, p. 119). It has been further observed in the field of Q studies that the sayings of Jesus were, by nature, oral performance (Horsley 2006). Thus, performance studies within biblical studies make sure that the scriptures, both Jewish and Christian, at the outset were performed in various ways.

Out of the three dimensions, the current study turns its attention to the performative dimension of the Christian scriptures in a Korean milieu. Perhaps the best benefit from Watts’s theory is that it enables us to look more closely at scriptural performance at two different levels: the performance of the scriptures as *words* and as *contents*. Prior to analyzing diverse performances of the Bible in the Korean context, it is important to clarify the underlying assumption that Watts’s theory can be rendered all the more complicated, given that performing the Bible calls for sensibilities of cultural differences in a society. That is to say, the idiosyncratic nature of Korean Christianity makes the performance of the Bible extraordinary. The reason for this is that the performative dimension goes hand in hand with the semantic dimension. As a corollary, the performance of the Bible in Korea has long been appropriated to Korean societal and cultural values. This indicates that performing the Bible in the *Sitz-im-Leben* of South Korea would and should demonstrate how Koreans understand the Bible in contemporary society. For instance, performing the scriptures is to be understood in the context of Korean religions such as Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism (Wang 2009, p. 41). It is my contention in the present study that the performative dimension of the scriptures has flourished alongside their semantic dimension in the context of South Korea.

I will explore scriptural performance in the Korean context in three stages. To begin with, I will delve into the performative dimension of scriptures as words. I find it interesting that thoroughly reading (and listening to) the Bible in a holistic and collective manner has gained popularity. Next, I will investigate the performative dimension of scriptures as contents in song and drama forms, respectively. The Bible’s musical and dramatic representations bring the cultural and social imaginations of Korean Christianity to light. Finally, I will re-examine the implications of the performance of the Bible at the semantic level. Henceforth, it is suggested that performing the scriptures in the Korean context calls for a semantic analysis as well.

## 2. Performing the Scriptures as Words: The Korean Way of Thoroughly Reading (and Listening to) the Bible

In this section, I will probe the ways in which Korean Christians read (and listen to) the Bible in its entirety, which is called *TongDok* (통독) in Korean. *TongDok* can be simply defined as a Christian way of reading through the Bible from cover to cover. As mentioned above, the Jewish and Christian scriptures were originally recited before audiences. *TongDok* may well be seen as a continuation of the Jewish and Christian liturgical readings of the scriptures. However, it should be remembered that Western missionaries rarely, if ever, introduced such a Jewish and Christian oral performance to Korean Christians. When seen in this way, *TongDok* is undoubtedly a unique tradition in the history of Korean Christianity.

Let us take a brief look at the *TongDok* tradition in the history of Korean Christianity in a narrow and broad context. In a narrow context, Yohan Yoo adeptly introduces the public reading of the Bible in critical engagement with the history of early Korean Protestantism (Yoo 2006, pp. 230–32). Yoo traces the origin of *TongDok* to the revival meetings in the early 20th century. Studying the Bible in a collective mode was central to the revival meetings in early Korean churches. It is significant to remember that the Pyongyang Great Revival of 1907, an epoch-making event in the history of Korean Christianity, initially took the shape of a Bible study meeting (Min 2007, pp. 287–308). The Great Revival meetings took both reading aloud and listening to the Bible very seriously, encouraging Christians to feel the pangs of conscience at their sins in the act of reading and listening (Yoo 2006, p. 230). Fundamental to the revival meetings was a religious performance of vociferously reading and listening to the Bible. In a broad context, Yoo also argues that the Christian ritual of reading the Bible in a public setting is closely interlocked with other Korean religions (Yoo 2006, p. 231). Korean Buddhism and Confucianism alike have traditionally deemed it pivotal to blatantly recite the scriptures in public. To illustrate, reciting the *Maha Prajna Paramita Hrdaya Sutra* (반야심경) or the *Vajracchedika Prajna Paramita Sutra* (금강경) has been considered as a popular devotional practice in the Buddhist tradition. Likewise, reading the *Thousand Character Classic* (천자문) or the textbook of the *Early Learning* (소학) aloud has been an important pedagogical practice in the Confucian tradition. Thus, a brief survey of the historical origin and religious background of the performance of loudly reading through the Bible in a public environment helps us scrutinize the newly emerging religious practice of *TongDok*.

In recent years, Byungho Zoh has been arguably the most well-known advocate for *TongDok* in South Korea. Outside liturgical settings, Zoh elaborates on *TongDok* as an endeavor to read the Bible thoroughly (with as little interruption as possible), primarily for the sake of holistic comprehension (Zoh 2012, p. 137). He deliberately makes a marked contrast between an expository method of preaching the Word of God and a comprehensive method of reading it. He adamantly asserts that Korean Christianity has recently shifted its focus from expository preaching to thorough reading (pp. 132–33). When it comes to the way of understanding the Bible, he labels the former a Western and analytical approach, and the latter an Eastern and synthetic approach (p. 137). To put it otherwise, he understands *TongDok* as an Eastern method based on integration of knowledge, in stark contrast with the expository sermon as a Western method for the dissection of knowledge. To illustrate this further, he takes as an example the case of a Korean pastor currently eager to broadcast *TongDok* at the ecclesial level, who used to read aloud the Confucian scriptures in *Seodang*—a traditional Korean Confucian school in a smaller village—in his youth (p. 134). Wang notes: “The tradition of reading ‘Four Books and Three Classics of Confucianism’ (四書五經) was newly changed into a custom of reading and memorizing the words of the Bible” (Wang 2009, p. 45). As noted above, it is important to remember that the public reading of scriptures in Korea has traditionally been regarded as a religious convention in the approach to sacred texts.

In Zoh’s estimation, thorough listening is as equally important as thorough reading on the assumption that the first is supplemental to the second for the purpose of a holistic understanding of the Bible. If such is the case, thorough listening has good reason to take the place of thorough reading on the part of modern Christians who are extremely busy with work but enthusiastic about understanding

the Bible in an audible manner, at the very least. Nowadays, it is not hard to find a special conference in which those Christians devoted to the comprehension of the Bible get together to finish listening to the entirety of the scriptures within a few days. In today's highly technologically advanced society, it comes as no surprise that applications are available through the Google Play and Apple Store services. All in all, thorough listening, on a par with thorough reading, stays at the cutting edge of a comprehensive understanding of the Bible in Korean context, albeit in an individualistic mode.

So far, we have succinctly reviewed the performative dimension of the Bible as words through the example of *TongDok* as a Korean Christian way of reading and listening to the Bible as a whole. It is intriguing to observe that the performative dimension has shifted from its Christian ritual as a form of Bible study to a *modus operandi* of understanding the Bible outside ritual settings. In the beginning, the public reading of the scriptures was performed in the middle of revival meetings as part of the Christian ritual. The underlying implication is that the communal performance of reading the scriptures constitutes the most significant part of Bible study. Apart from a liturgical setting, *TongDok* has recently been recognized as a holistic way to comprehend the Bible by dint of an either visible or audible sense, especially on an individual, rather than collective, level. Overall, an important point to bear in mind is that the performative dimension of *TongDok* has a closer connection to the long-standing traditions of Korean religions that stress the practice of vociferously reading scriptures in a public space.

### 3. Performing the Scriptures as Contents: the Korean Way of Singing the Bible

In addition to performing the scriptures as words, Korean Christianity concentrates on performing the scriptures as contents in artistic ways. Above all, the present study concerns the Korean Christian way of singing the scriptures. I draw specific attention to *pansori* (판소리)—a Korean traditional way of singing—through which we run into the distinct features of Korean musical performance of the Bible. The words *pan* (판) and *sori* (소리) signify a public space and sound, respectively. Taken together, *pansori* means to sing in an open area such as a public square or market. *Pansori* consists of a combined performance of both a vocalist and drummer. The performance of a singer involves *chang* (창 singing), *aniri* (아니리 narration) or *sasol* (사설 narration), and *ballim* (발림 gestures). In correspondence, that of a drummer is made up of the beating of a traditional Korean drum and shouting words in interactions with the singer. *Pansori* is *ipso facto* a type of dramatic music, namely, a melodic unfolding of a story, in a vibrant mode (Kim 2008, p. 45).

As Kyung-hee Kim points out, it is interesting that *pansori* retains the musical elements of Korean Shamanism in the Southern area (p. 45). A shaman would dedicate a song to divine beings in the midst of ritual with the result that it could entertain the audience simultaneously. In other words, *pansori* derives its origin from a shaman's performance (Yang 2013, pp. 48–49). Surprisingly, *pansori*, the Korean traditional musical performance, has recently had occasion to transfer to the other religion than Shamanism: that is, Christianity, as it has rapidly grown in Korean culture.

Perhaps the best example is the *pansori* entitled *Jesus' Story* (예수 전), which was originally performed by Dong Jin Park (1916–2003). The *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* is a ground-breaking work in the history of Korean traditional music. Remember that there had been only five extant works around the time when the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* came into being—namely, *Chunhyangga* (춘향가 a love story between a noble man and the daughter of a courtesan), *Simcheongga* (심청전 a filial story about the daughter of a blind man), *Heungbuga* (흥부가 a moral story about a wealthy wicked older brother and a poor kind younger brother), *Sugungga* (수궁가 a humorous story about a sharp-witted rabbit and a deceitful turtle), and *Jeokbyeokga* (절벽가 a military story about Chinese heroes). When Park started performing the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* in 1969, many (though not all) critics spoke poorly of this innovative enterprise to embody Christianity in a Korean way (Yi 2009, pp. 311–17). Specifically, the Christian *pansori* was initially quite provocative to both *pansori* experts and conservative Christians. *Pansori* specialists did not believe that the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* conveyed a set of traditional Korean emotions such as *han* (한 the Korean description of abysmal pain), *jeong* (정 the Korean description of

mutual love), and *heung* (흥 the Korean description of indefatigable exhilaration) through the platform of western religion (cf. Park 1993, p. 15; Joh 2004, pp. 152–53). Meanwhile, stubborn believers were suspicious of the indigenized expression of Christianity as represented by the so-called Christian *pansori* for fear that it might distort the alleged essence of Christianity. In spite of all this, there has been a recent tendency to look positively at the rendezvous between Korean traditional culture and western religion in the sense that it has generated a third space in which both can flourish, expanding the regime of one into that of the other.

Keeping this in mind, I turn my attention to the narrative structure of the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story*. Reportedly, the version of the *pansori* tale of Jesus was originally written by Tae Ik Joo, a dramatist, and composed and, presumably, slightly re-written by Park. This can be confirmed by my personal interview with Yang Sook Kim as the director of the Dong Jin Park *Pansori* Training Center. The work is divided into two parts: the first is concerned with the story of Jesus' birth and the second is with the story of his passion, death, and resurrection. Apparently, the first is based on stories drawn from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the second on the four canonical gospels of the New Testament. As the title *Jesus' Story* literally indicates, the *pansori* has an increased focus on his life itself for the sake of brevity.

As suggested above, the *pansori* of *Jesus's Story* remains loyal to the storylines of the New Testament gospels in general terms. Still, a closer examination reveals that the work encompasses the *Sitz-im-Leben* of Korean Christians such that it becomes recognizable as a by-product of Korean contextual theology (Yang 2013). At the very beginning, the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* undertakes to situate the narratives of Jesus' birth in a broader Asian context by creating a stark contrast between ancient kings in Asia and Jesus in Palestine. Ancient Asian kings' births are described as noble ones, with the emergence of colorful rainbows, blue and brown dragons, and pairs of phoenixes, all of which represent the magnificence of heroes in Asian traditions and culture. By comparison, Jesus' birth is depicted as the humble birth of the savior descending from heaven to earth. However, it is noteworthy to mention that the emphasis for the current study is not that the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* makes a distinction between ancient Asian kings and Jesus in terms of their birth narratives, but that it attempts to reinterpret Jesus' birth against the ancient Asian cultural background.

Furthermore, the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* paints his birth and passion with sorrow in such a way that it can evoke sympathy among the audience for his wretched life. On the one hand, a greatly expanded elaboration of Joseph and Mary's journey to a place of delivery accentuates their miserable life. It is remarkable that *jinyangjo* (진양조), the slowest rhythm of *pansori*, is employed to express the dejection of Jesus' mother (Kim 2008, p. 34). In a similar fashion, the soliloquy from Jesus' father indicates his despair over the impoverished birth of Jesus in the form of *aniri* or storytelling: "How regrettable and mortifying it is that the Messiah was born among livestock in a foreign land". Strikingly, even a donkey in the manger addresses the irony that the greatest savior is about to be born in such a shabby place. On the other hand, the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* describes Jesus' carrying of the cross up to Golgotha more scrupulously than the four gospels, especially in *jinyangjo*, to stress his suffering in an elongated manner. In my assessment, the portrait of Jesus' birth and passion as sorrowful, both consciously and unconsciously, transmits the emotion of *han*, or appalling grief, to the Korean audience.

What is interesting is that the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* understands the abandonment of Jesus' followers immediately after the crucifixion from the perspective of *jeong*, or mutual affection. Park regretfully comments that all the crowd and Jesus' disciples turn their backs on the crucified Jesus, which reflects the sheer lack of *jeong*. In the scene that immediately ensues, Park's praise of the dauntless action of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to bury Jesus insinuates that their intrepidity conveys a type of emotion translatable as an abundance of *jeong* in the semantics of Korean culture. For the most part, the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* signals Korean emotions such as *han* and *jeong* in a static mode.

However, it would be too rash to understand Korean emotions at a static level alone. By way of illustration, the use of Korean words of encouragement such as *eo/ssiguna* (얼씨구나) and *jeol/ssiguna*

(절씨구나) demonstrates a way of expressing passionate emotion called *heung*, or the Korean ingrained emotion of jubilation, in a dynamic mode. For instance, the shepherds exclaim with great joy as soon as they find the infant Jesus in a manger, saying *eolssiguna* (얼씨구나) and *jeolssiguna* (절씨구나). In a similar vein, the women in the empty tomb utter the greatest happiness of finding the resurrected Jesus, using the same Korean words. In this way, such interjections as *eolssiguna* (얼씨구나) and *jeolssiguna* (절씨구나)—comparable to *הנה* (behold) in Hebrew, *ἰδοὺ* (behold) in Greek or *ἀμὴν ἀμὴν* (verily, verily) in Greek—bespeak a kind of unshakable exuberance in the Korean semantics of emotion.

It is also worth noting that the rhythm of *jungjungmori* (중중모리) is deliberately designed for a delightful mood, such that both shepherds in the birth scene and women in the resurrection scene are motivated to jubilantly dance, ironically in adverse circumstances (Kim 2008, p. 37). As can be seen above, the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* discloses a wide range of Korean emotions in both static and dynamic manners.

Apart from the Korean cultural background and emotion, the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* runs parallel to the social and political context of Korea under the long shadow of the Japanese colonial empire (1910–1945). There is a sufficient reason for assuming that Park is well aware of the colonial situation of the New Testament in that he mentioned the presence of empire in the birth and passion narratives and described the Jews as “colonial subjects” in the passion narrative. More often than not, the work under consideration substantially concerns the desires of the so-called *Minjung*—equivalent to the Greek term *ἄλλοσ*—which denotes those who are socially, culturally, or economically alienated from the dominant society, in the Korean context (Ahn 1993, pp. 167–70). When viewed from a *Minjung* theological perspective, the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* betokens the situation of *Minjung* in the form of *aniri*. As an example, let us consider the conversation between anonymous characters in the beginning. A *Minjung* despondently remarks that s/he had better die than live under imperialist oppression. In correspondence, another *Minjung* proclaims hope for a bright future yet to be created by the long-awaited Messiah. In this conversation, the Messiah is presented as the one who emancipates the *Minjung* from the bondage of suppression, both politically and economically. Similarly, a lengthy conversation between shepherds in the birth narrative underscores their perennial expectations for the savior from oppressions under the domination of a series of empires (Yang 2013, p. 116). This emphasis on harsh repression and hope for the future brings to the fore the liberating message of the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story*.

All things considered, Park has established Christian identity by performing the story of Jesus through the Korean traditional musical medium of *pansori*. Regarding identity formation, performance may be mistakenly taken to mean that it reiterates the same identity across a range of temporal and spatial scales. This position assumes that Park's dramatic and musical performance repetitiously reaffirms what was believed to be Christian identity in the first century Mediterranean world. This being the case, the performance of *pansori* may well be supposed to repeat the very Christian identity that was originally embedded within the Christian scriptures. However, I would rather posit a quite different notion that performance in a specific context makes a difference in the construction of identity. To elaborate on this point further, Christian identity is, to some extent, contingent on scriptural performance (Lieu 2004, p. 21). Overall, Christian identity can be considered as either shaping or being shaped by the scriptures, depending on whether one takes a static or dynamic perspective. Likewise, Christian identity in Korean context molds and is molded by Christian *pansori* in a static and dynamic mode, respectively. Even though both perspectives may be equally possible, I emphasize the latter over the former to concentrate on the construction of Korean Christianity by the performance of the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story*. Taking a dynamic perspective, I am convinced that Christian *pansori* creates Christian identity in the context of Korea rather than copying its original identity. Needless to say, Park's performance of the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story* is an attempt to contextualize Christian identity within both the range of Korean emotions and the *Umwelt* of Korea through the history of colonialism and imperialism (cf. Gifford 2008). Along these lines, I believe that Park will also have performed a Korean version of Christian identity in ongoing interactions with his anonymous audiences, who were

concerned about their life context. I go further by arguing that the performative dimension collaborates with the semantic dimension, particularly when Christianity migrates from West to East.

#### 4. Performing the Scripture as *Contents*: the Korean Way of Dramatizing the Bible

Up until now, I have investigated an artistic way of performing the Bible at the individual level through the *pansori* of *Jesus's Story*. In the current section, I will explore a Korean way of performing the Bible at the communal level by investigating bibliodrama, or an improvised play created by imaginative engagement with biblical stories (Pitzele 1998, p. 11). Let us elucidate the meaning of bibliodrama for the moment. Through his publication *Sachbuch Bibliodrama: Praxis und Theorie*, Gerhard M. Martin opens the new possibility of turning a biblical narrative into an extemporaneous drama through a process of voluntary interactions between participants (Martin 2001). For the sake of clarity, it is helpful to make a clear-cut distinction between sacred drama and bibliodrama. Distinct from sacred drama, as a rehearsed play based on a script, bibliodrama is an improvised play built on the interpretation of every participant in a biblical narrative (Koh 2016, pp. 8–9). Bibliodrama invites real readers to engage in the narrative world of the Bible through their creative performance.

Having said that, it is important to clarify the interpretive framework operative in of bibliodrama. In the words of Peter A. Pitzele, it is commensurate with midrashic interpretation, in which it is intended to read between the lines in pursuit of meaning (pp. 11–12). Like midrashic interpretation, the interpretation of bibliodrama engages ceaselessly with both the context of the text and that of real readers. In marked contrast to the traditional and mainstream biblical interpretation focused on the text and its context in search of the authorial intent, bibliodrama places more emphasis on real readers and their context in quest of the lived meaning of the Bible in today's society. Bibliodrama makes the best use of gaps between the text and readers, in which a scintillating conversation takes place between them. The final result is that bibliodrama performs the surplus of meaning enacted by readers' keenly imaginative engagement with the Bible. In this regard, bibliodrama is, by nature, performative.

Some Korean theologians in the fields of practical theology, in general and pastoral counseling in particular, have introduced bibliodrama to those interested in the lived meanings of the scriptures in ecclesial settings in a way that incorporates the skills of psychodrama into the concerns of pastoral counseling (Koh 2016, pp. 1–2; cf. Kim and Hwang 2018). Se Jun Kim and Hun Young Hwang are right to impute the unforeseen emergence of bibliodrama to difficult situations in life in South Korea, which call on Christians to have a dynamic encounter with the Bible as a source of meaning (p. 11). To illustrate, many—though not all—Christians have trouble finding answers to the problems in their lives by depending solely on the authority of pastors (Sohn 2010, pp. 431–34). Rather, Christians themselves desire to more contextually and critically take part in the communal process of biblical interpretation in their unfavorable conditions, being vulnerable to life crises such as job loss, divorce, illness, death, and the like. The key point here is that bibliodrama in Korea performs the Bible as it pertains to healing through the power of scriptures. Bibliodrama serves to debunk the suffering in today's life in ingenious engagement with that in biblical narrative. By way of comparison, a sheer confrontation of real suffering can assist Christians in finding a solution in biblical story. In other words, while embodying the characters of biblical narrative, the performers interpret the event of the Bible with the purpose of discovering its meaning, which is eventually projected to their real life. In the process, bibliodrama leads to a potential for a message of restoration through communal interactions; sometimes suffering together, other times comforting together. This means that bibliodrama aims to empower the recovery of the Christian community from the agonies of life at the collective level.

In other words, bibliodrama offers an imaginary space in which participants can discover their problems in the past and understand them anew by assuming a role in dramatic settings (Kim and Hwang 2018, pp. 13–15). For instance, a bibliodrama based on the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) would enable participants to recognize their traumatic experiences of life in the scene of eating pods for pigs. Alternately, an unscripted role-play as the father of the prodigal son would empower a participant struggling with his/her own father in real life to comprehend him in

a drastically different way. In this manner, an impromptu performance can facilitate a transformed understanding of the problems in life.

In addition, bibliodrama can extend itself to social issues beyond the problems of individuals that are primarily relevant to a family setting. A striking example can be drawn from a special bibliodrama that was devised for the citizens grieving over the *Sewol* ferry disaster. Over the past few years, South Korean society has observed its most socially traumatic calamity, which resulted in the loss of 304 innocent lives, including passengers and crew members, on 16 April 2014. The sinking of the *Sewol* ferry has so far inspired Korean society to cast aspersions on the captain and crew who abandoned the ship and the drowning passengers, the Korean government, which took no immediate action to rescue passengers from drowning, and the mass media, which attempted to downplay the social and political consequences of this tragic event. Along these lines, a momentous bibliodrama entitled *Survivors* was invented to heal some of the citizens who had suffered severely from this societal traumatic experience, three months after the *Sewol* ferry disaster.<sup>1</sup> Terry and Done remark: “Theorists of social drama use the language and concepts of performance and drama as a way of examining social conflict, social crises, and the ways performance impacts social unity and conflict resolution” (Giles and Doan 2008, p. 275). As is the case with *Survivors*, the performance of the Bible could and should have social and cultural repercussions upon both Korean churches and society.

In summary, I have accounted for the performative nature of bibliodrama in the following way. First, the dramatic performance of the Bible, though a local, rather than national, phenomenon in Korean churches, transforms Korean Christians from passive readers to active participants in the biblical narrative.<sup>2</sup> Bibliodrama galvanizes Christians into the creative process of making meaning out of the Bible as a sacred text. Second, bibliodrama as an improvised play encourages Korean Christians to utilize the power of their imagination so that the Bible can address them as a living text and vice versa. This imaginary performativity of the Bible gives rise to a surplus of meaning that cannot be expected from traditional biblical interpretation. Third, bibliodrama seeks to respond to the conditions of Korean Christians susceptible to unexpected life risks. Performing the Bible in a modern context can prompt Christians to find a message about recovery from wounds by identifying themselves with certain characters in a biblical narrative. Fourth, bibliodrama hints at the possibility that the Bible constitutes a social cure to an injustice-stricken society. The spontaneous nature of bibliodrama helps catalyze the sensibility that one is disposed to interpret the Bible in a manner that assumes greater accountability for societal problems. Finally and most importantly, we should not forget that bibliodrama is a collective performance in the creation of meaning from the scriptures. With the help of bibliodrama, biblical interpretation is no longer dominated by the religious elite, but rather is equally performed by the common people who possess their own as-yet-undeciphered life stories.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

According to the categories suggested by Watts, we have thus far explored scriptural performance in South Korea in two ways: one at the level of *words* and the other at the level of *contents*. It is observable in the Korean context that the performance of the Bible at the level of contents gives greater freedom than at the level of words. Regarding the current project, the most important point to stress is that Watts’ theory on scriptural performance asks for its modification in a way that allows us to reconsider the cultural differences between Western and Eastern Christianity. The specificity of the *Sitz-im-Leben* of Korean Christianity requires us to be more cognizant of how its religious, cultural,

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<sup>1</sup> The *Survivors*—as an attempt for Christian to be involved in social issues—was held in the 100th Anniversary Memorial Church on 3 June 2014. Available online: <http://kimdt.net/html/reference/reference02.php?id=754&code=board9&cate=&gfile=view>.

<sup>2</sup> For this, see the sources available from the Bibliodrama & Dramatherapy Institute. Available online: <http://kimdt.net/html/main/main.php>.

and social values operate in scriptural performance. It is the contention here that the adaptation of Christianity to Korean soil renders the performative dimension all the more semantic.

At first, we have seen the performative dimension of the scriptures as words through the example of reading the Bible completely in a collective mode. This Korean method of reading the scriptures has its origin in public reading in the earliest Korean Christian revival meetings. In recent years, the performance of thoroughly reading the Bible has evolved into thoroughly listening to it. It is important to remember that the Korean religious traditions of publicly reading the scriptures, as is the case with Confucianism and Buddhism, have a mediate or immediate impact on the performance of thoroughly reading, and consequently listening to, the Bible in the context of Korean Christianity.

Next, we have probed the performative dimension of the scriptures as contents at the individual level by closely examining the *pansori* of *Jesus' Story*. Park's performance of the Bible in the form of *pansori* reveals that a group of Korean conventional emotions—such as *han* (a feeling of appalling agony), *jeong* (a feeling of reciprocal affection), and *heung* (a feeling of unflagging excitement)—have a Korean version of the gospel under their command. Culturally, the performance of singing the Bible in South Korea therefore implies that Christian *pansori* simultaneously creates and is created by Christian identity.

Finally, we have scrutinized the performative dimension of the scriptures as contents at the collective level, as can be seen from bibliodrama. Dramatizing the Bible indicates that the performance of the Bible can be rendered more participatory, inventive, contextual, social, and collective in consideration of its extemporaneous nature. Lucidly, bibliodrama functions as a medium through which to reinterpret the social issues of South Korea as Christians wrestle with their life problems. In this context, bibliodrama is a communal performance that makes shared meaning of the Bible in a rapidly changing society.

Overall, we have had time to evaluate the performative dimension of the Christian scriptures in conjunction with their semantic dimension. We have observed that the Korean ways of performing the Bible at the level of words and contents are essentially deeply rooted in the Korean means of signifying it. The specific context of South Korea—whether religious, cultural, or social—alerts us to the performed transformation of the semantic range of the long-standing Christian tradition. In the long term, Christianity is such a global religion that it provokes a more complex analysis of its scriptural performance in its widely differing range of semantics. As Paul Gifford suggests, a survey of the performative dimension in the Korean context nudges scholars of theology and religion in the direction of intercultural and/or postcolonial studies (Gifford 2008, pp. 204–5). More specifically, the differences in age, status, gender, etc. would and should significantly affect how the Bible can be performed as a sacred text both in Korean Christianity and beyond (Morris 1996, pp. 380–82).

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