

THE WORD BECAME FRESH: HOW TO PREACH FROM OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE TEXTS

A Book Review

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by

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Introduction

At the time of publication of this book the author, Dale Ralph Davis, served as pastor of Woodland Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He formerly taught Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. Davis has also written commentaries on Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel, and First and Second Kings.

Summary

The purpose of *The Word Became Fresh* is to "focus on the proper interpretation of Old Testament narratives in preparation for preaching." The book "is meant as an exercise in reading the Old Testament for fun and profit" (i, ii).

The author's thesis is that as we approach Old Testament narratives we must begin and continue throughout the interpretation process with prayer, "begging" God for help in understanding His¹ word. Reflecting on the thoughts of John Owen in this regard, Davis states, "We are guilty of arrogance, not merely neglect, when we fail to beg for the Spirit's help in the study of Scripture" (1). Davis expands his thesis: it is not just the necessity of prayer but also "one must take account of two realities: Spirit and text. . . . So I seek the Spirit's aid and use an approach suited to the form of His word. Hence, at the very least, I ask *questions* of the text. This is my 'procedure' as far as it goes. There is nothing supercharged about it. I do not follow this regime of questions in any decreed order. It is all very basic, I use it partly because it *is* simple

and I can carry it around in my mental hip pocket" (3, 4). Davis' questions are these: Why? (intention), Where? (context), How? (structure), What? (content), and So what? (appropriation/application) (4-7).

On the importance of prayer in Scripture interpretation, Davis agrees with David Dockery: "the sermonic process begins with prayer. God's direction and enablement must be sought at each step."² Stuart Briscoe speaks of "prayerful meditation" in sermon preparation as well as "prayer designed to help people in their individual responses" to the sermon.³ Stephen Brown writes, "Ask God to make you sensitive to what is going on around you. Ask Him to make you an observer of what people say, think, and do."⁴ Prayer must be woven into—even dominate—every aspect of sermon preparation. It must be no mere formality. It must not be cold. And it must not be hurried. Perhaps Jesus would ask His preachers each week what He asked in the Garden of Gethsemane: "So, could you not watch with Me one hour" (Matthew 26:40)? David Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "Above all—and this I regard as most important of all—always respond to every impulse to pray . . . I would make an absolute law of this—always obey such an impulse. Where does it come from? It is the work of the Holy Spirit. . . ."⁵

We may summarize the author's purpose and thesis thus: with much humble prayer and the illumination of the Holy Spirit we may interpret the narrative text of Scripture by asking the right questions. The first question Davis asks—Why?—goes right to the heart of one of the most important interpretive issues of our day: authorial intent. Why did the author of the biblical text say what he said? What was his intention? In our postmodern culture where all authority is questioned, authorial intent is bypassed, even despised. Davis writes, "Why did the writer include this text? What was he trying to get across by relating it? . . . Usually the writer's purpose is *theocentric* (italics his)—he intends to communicate something about God. . . . Sometimes

intention is obvious . . . at other times repetition may betray intention. . . . Now all this concern with a writer's intention is terribly out of step. . . . Reader-response criticism is more the current rage; it only wants to answer, 'How does this text affect me?' There is no precise or correct meaning but only meanings which arise from within the reader.⁶ I admit my preoccupation with a writer's intention is dated. And I really don't care. It's hard to get away from the suspicion that someone meant to mean something with a text" (4, 5).

Albert Mohler affirms Davis' statements regarding authorial intent. Mohler states,

Because postmodern culture is committed to a radical vision of liberation, all authorities must be overthrown, including texts, authors, traditions, metanarratives, the Bible, God, and all powers on heaven and earth. All authority is denounced, deconstructed, and cast aside—except, of course, for the authority of the postmodern theorists and cultural figures themselves, who wield their power in the name of oppressed peoples everywhere.⁷

In the Preface the author indicates that he is "leery of saying too much about preaching" but rather "these pages focus on the proper interpretation of Old Testament narratives in preparation for preaching" (i). This is a contrast from Calvin Miller's chapter on "Narrative Preaching" in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*. Miller approaches the topic by dealing with strengths, weaknesses, goals, and development of the narrative sermon.⁸ Miller's model focuses on communication, with very little regarding interpretation, while Dale Ralph Davis focuses on interpretation with very little said about the communication (delivery and other matters). If used side-by-side, the two approaches together would complement one another and be of great help to preachers.

Critical Evaluation

One of the strengths of the author's work on Old Testament narratives is his emphasis on the holiness of God. He quotes from Joshua 24:

But Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the LORD." Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel" (verses 19-23).

Davis proceeds to muse upon an imaginary situation in which Joshua is conducting an evangelistic rally. He issues the altar call. The music starts. People come forward. Then, when he sees what is happening, Joshua rushes to the microphone and cries, "No! No! You don't understand. Get back to your seats. Better yet, go home—you really need to think this over." Joshua is not trying to keep people from God but to "keep them from blandly coming to him, from one of those of-course-this-is-what-we-should-do commitments. Israel must understand that Yahweh is not craving their attention but searching their earnestness. When they come to Yahweh they will meet red-hot holiness rather than gushing acceptance. They must know the sort of God they are claiming to serve. Verse nineteen would serve as a splendid antidote to some contemporary 'evangelism'" (22).

My evaluation is this: If a person comes to the Lord at death without Jesus, then they will meet that "red-hot holiness rather than gushing acceptance." But if they come to the Lord at death having repented and believed in Jesus, then they will still meet that same holiness, but with divine acceptance. I understand the author's use of the word "gushing" to describe the ill-founded and ill-fated expectation of the wicked upon death. However, for true followers of the Jesus Christ, God's acceptance will not be gushing—like a woman seeing an adorable newborn baby or like an underling praising a dictator—but rather like the father of the prodigal son: "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And

bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:22-24). Or again, like this: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:21, 23).

Davis also helps to magnify the holiness of God in his comments on Uzzah in Second Samuel chapter six and First Chronicles thirteen. Uzzah was one of the sons of Kohath, authorized to transport the ark of the testimony according to strict guidelines. Numbers 4:15 must have been a memory verse for Uzzah: "But they must not touch the holy things, lest they die." Well, the oxen stumbled and Uzzah touched the ark to steady it. The Lord immediately struck Uzzah. David was angry and afraid. And Uzzah was dead. The author comments: "Why did no one trouble to consult the manual? Is Yahweh at fault because he proved faithful to revelation he had already given? Still, protests come to mind: But Uzzah was only trying to help! Why didn't the Lord cut him some slack? Why so abrupt: why no margin for error—or instinct? Answer: I don't know, and I wager you won't find out either. But I suspect the text is not too interested in satisfying your curiosity. You want to find a satisfactory explanation; the text wants you to see a holy God. Many readers will probably not be satisfied with this response, but I think the Uzzah episode says to us: You can either gripe or tremble; you'll do better to tremble" (70).

Still on the theme of holiness, the author writes regarding "Judah's fling with Tamar" (64) in Genesis 38, "Who can deny that it's an apt word for the church? The sexual behavior of professing Christians is the one arena where holiness often fails to leave its mark" (66). But, of course, it is not a failing on the part of "holiness." It is rather that the failing one has not heeded Hebrews 12:14—"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." I also protest to Davis' language when he writes, "Why did God and the Holy

Ghost permit these shameful things ('Nasties') to be written? . . . That no one should despair on account of his sins." Rather, I say, let the people of God despair much over our refusals to repent of our favorite sins. But let us not despair over sins of which, by the wonderful grace of Jesus, we have repented!

The author is right to emphasize the Abrahamic Covenant of Genesis 12. Davis calls it "The Quad Promise": People, Protection/Presence, Program, and Place (32, 33). Yet he reminds us that "the people of God . . . may enter into a solemn covenant—and they are not above breaking every particular of that covenant" (89). Throughout the Old Testament we see that the repentance of God's people is often short-lived. We see that, for example, in what I call "the cycle you don't want to ride" in the Book of Judges. It often happens so fast! In Nehemiah 9:25 the people reveled in God's wonderful goodness and in the very next verse they rebelled. How like them I tend to be.

Good, practical advice comes to us in the author's words to pastors: "Sometimes we can begin by trying to take our people along with us in unpuzzling such a narrative; we simply . . . ask, 'Why is this told?' or, 'What does it teach?' And some answers begin to pop up" (63).

There is a wonderful application that the author brings to our attention with regard to the widow of Zarephath in I Kings 17. Not only did her husband die, but also her son. There was a drought, precious little food, and Elijah wanted to be served first. "Quite a number of a pastor's congregation would gather immense comfort from simply seeing the widow's dilemma. They would say to themselves, 'Yes, that's exactly the sort of thing I'm facing just now—I have had these obvious and distinct evidences of the goodness of the Lord and now he seems to have body-slammed me to the mat.' And a preacher need not solve this problem; his people will get

much encouragement if he simply identifies it in the text. They will get the sense that the Bible is a book that *understands* them" (author's emphasis) (106).

Regarding the familiar narratives of the Old Testament, Davis encourages us to approach the text with a "first time reader frame of mind" (19). We've read these Bible stories so many times. We know the conclusion. We are no longer surprised. What shall we do? "We can always read it *as if* (author's emphasis) for the first time, that is, holding our privileged information in abeyance and adopting the perspective of the characters in the (biblical) plot who remain eternal first-time participants. . . . Such a second-time reading complements a first-time reading. . . . A truism of Old Testament (stories is this): they are always more complex than a first-time reading suggests."⁹

Davis' work is not as comprehensive as Walter Kaiser's *Toward an Old Testament Theology* in which he takes the reader through the rigors of the syntactical-theological method for interpreting the Old Testament (narratives).¹⁰ Kaiser's approach, by his own admission, "is enough to overwhelm almost anyone" with "so many instructions, steps, and cautions."¹¹ Both have their place. Davis' book will be valuable to both pastors and lay people alike. Kaiser's book, it seems, may be more helpful to pastors.

I do not wish to be petty, but I did not care for the title of the book, *The Word Became Fresh*. It is a pun on John 1:14 ("the Word became flesh").¹² It seems that a less cute and clever (and more reverent) title would have been appropriate in actually telling the reader what is to be expected in the book—a book about proper interpretation of Old Testament narratives and the author's worthy emphases of prayer, Spirit, and text (3, 4). To my (perhaps overly zealous) conscience, the title could imply that the Word was once not fresh!

Conclusion

There is great benefit for me in Dale Ralph Davis' book. There is genius in its brevity and readability. Notwithstanding the title, it was a *refreshing* primer on Old Testament narrative. It made me laugh: "And when all the satraps and postal workers have their back sides in the air and their noses in the sand before Nebuchadnezzar's giant dummy. . ." (17)! It made me think: "In our finest hermeneutical moments we are only a step from idolatry" (145). It made me think again: "And whenever you see God clearly in a text you can be sure there is something very applicable there for you" (9). It made me thank God for His wonderful Old Testament narratives and the privilege that is mine to preach them. And now I am much better equipped to do so.

¹The author does not capitalize divine pronouns; he refers to God as "he," not "He." When *not* quoting the author in this paper, I capitalize pronouns such as "You" and "He" when they are referring to God.

²Michael Duduit, ed. *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 147.

³*Ibid.*, 192, 197.

⁴*Ibid.*, 201.

⁵David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 170,171.

⁶Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* (Wheaton: Bridgeport, 1994), 281.

⁷R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Post-Modern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 121, 122.

⁸Michael Duduit, ed. *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 103-115.

⁹Grenville J. R. Kent, Paul J. Kissling, Laurence A. Turner, eds., *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 19.

¹⁰Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 235.

¹²Quoted from *The English Standard Version* of the Bible, along with all previous Bible quotes in this review. WORDsearch Bible Explorer 4, CD-ROM, no copyright date available.