

RECLAIMING THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR CHRISTIAN PREACHING

A Book Review

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Kent, Grenville J. R., Paul J. Kissling, Laurence A. Turner, editors. *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010. 256 pp.

Introduction

At the time of the writing of the *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching*, the three editors were engaged in the following ministries: Grenville J. R. Kent, lecturer in Old Testament, Wesley Institute, Sydney, Australia; Paul J. Kissling, professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages and Director of Research, T. C. M. I. Institute, Austria; Laurence A. Turner, principal lecturer in Old Testament and Research Degrees Director, Newbold College, Bracknell, U. K. (7, 8).

The present book reflects on approaches, issues, and suggestions for preaching the Old Testament. It is written by thirteen scholar-preachers. Their perspectives are kaleidoscopic, both geographically and denominationally. The contributors preach and teach in North America, Africa, Australia, South America, Great Britain, Europe, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and the Middle East. They are Anglican, Baptist, charismatic, Congregational, independent evangelical, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist and The Uniting Church¹ (11, 12).

Summary

The purpose of *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching* is stated in the editors' prayer: that readers "will use all the rich resources of the Bible in the power of the Spirit to contribute to another revival (like that in Nehemiah 8), so that the good news of the kingdom can be preached worldwide and we can see Christ come" (12). The contributors endeavor to bring the above-mentioned approaches, issues, and suggestions to bear on various genres of the

Old Testament,² on several particular books of the Old Testament³ as well as on the issues of preaching difficult texts and preaching Christ from the Old Testament (5, 6).

With regard to genre studies as they relate to preaching Christ from the Old Testament, the book under review by Kissling, Kent, and Turner is in good company. Dennis E. Johnson's book *Him We Proclaim* has sixty-pages on apostolic, Christocentric preaching of Old Testament literary genres.⁴ Sidney Greidanus, in his book *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, also addresses types, analogies, and contrasts in the genres of the Old Testament.⁵ *Toward an Exegetical Theology* by Walter Kaiser includes "Special Issues" which explains the use of the genres of prophecy, narrative, and poetry for expository preaching.⁶ In *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, Graeme Goldsworthy devotes Part Two to biblical theology as it relates to preaching various genres found in the Old Testament.⁷ In *Cracking Old Testament Codes* Sandy and Giese "take us back to the way genres functioned for the biblical authors and audiences . . . (bringing) these genres up through time for present-day application."⁸ Much of Scott M. Gibson's book *Preaching the Old Testament* is also devoted to genre studies as they relate to preaching Christ from the Old Testament. Gibson's book intends to give preachers "the tools they need to preach from the Old Testament."⁹

The great majority of the book under review addresses preaching Christ from the Old Testament, from the perspective of genres. Yet nowhere in the book—it might have been expected in the Introduction—is there a statement that discusses biblical genres in general terms, and why they are significant for study and preaching. Graeme Goldsworthy comes to the rescue:

We take it for granted that there are different ways to communicate through the spoken and written word and most people have little difficulty in adapting to different forms. It is so much a part of our culture that we move from one genre of communication to another

without giving it a moment's thought. There are accepted conventions for scientific prose, for the short story, for a wedding invitation, or for a real estate advertisement in the newspaper, and we easily distinguish between them. When we come to the Bible, it does not take long for the new reader to grasp that a piece of historical narrative looks and sounds different from a psalm, a prophetic oracle, or a parable.

. . . Consider . . . the main biblical literary genres from the point of view of the literature as the vehicle for the theological truth of biblical revelation. It is less important for the preacher to be able to pin down the definition of genre, or to tabulate all the genres of the Bible, than it is to be aware that literature is used in different ways for different functions. Our aim should be to understand how the truth of God's word is variously communicated and to respond appropriately to the text in our exegesis. Within larger units that may be classified according to the predominant genre we may find various subgenres of kinds of literary expression. There will inevitably be gray areas where there may be some debate about genre and how the literary text is functioning, but on the whole we stand by the principles of the essential clarity of Scripture and its self-interpreting nature.¹⁰

Along the same lines of genres as they relate to preaching Christ from the Old Testament, Sandy and Giese write,

Do readers of the Bible—a document written more than two thousand years ago—recognize the differences in form, content, and function of the diversity of forms of expression in it? Do they realize that to understand the Bible correctly, they cannot treat every portion of Scripture the same. . . ? Though the original readers intuitively recognized the diversity of forms in the Bible and the differences of meaning of words and phrases in those forms, readers today are often unprepared for some of the ancient ways of expressing things. Ways of thinking and writing have changed through the millennia.

Fortunately, it is possible to identify the different forms used by the authors of Scripture. Even as a newspaper has certain codes implicit in the variety of sections within it that guide us in reading it correctly, so the Bible has literary codes that reveal how authors were expressing the word of the LORD and what they intended to communicate. Understanding what these codes are and the significance of them will help keep readers from misinterpreting Scripture and will guide them into correct interpretation and application. . . . The emerging consensus (is) that the codes embedded in the literary forms of the Old Testament are indispensable to correct interpretation.¹¹

Critical Evaluation

Kissling writes regarding preaching narrative texts, "The portrayals of the human characteristics of the Old Testament come to life before our very eyes and the eyes of our

listeners. We will either guide them to read their stories responsibly, or they will continue to decontextualize them and turn them into fodder for simplistic moralizing. Nehemiah the Christian C. E. O. and Abraham that fine Christian man will still fill the imaginations of our congregations until and unless their pastors show them a better way. We will either point them to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who used such broken human vessels to do his work, or our people will turn them into plaster saints who have nothing to say to us that is not a little bit naïve and a little bit dangerous" (43).

Michael S. Horton, of the Alliance for Confessing Evangelicals wrote in 1999, agreeing with Kissling on the matter of moralizing:

Not infrequently, we run into a church that is very excited about having just discovered the Reformation faith, but the preaching remains what it always was: witty, perhaps anecdotal (plenty of stories and illustrations that often serve the purpose of entertainment rather than illumination of a point), and moralistic (Bible characters surveyed for their usefulness in teaching moral lessons for our daily life). This is because we have not yet integrated our systematic theology with our hermeneutics (i. e., way of interpreting Scripture). We say, "Christ alone!" in our doctrine of salvation, but in actual practice our devotional life is saturated with sappy and trivial "principles" and the preaching is often directed toward motivating us through practical tips. . . .

Whenever the story of David and Goliath is used to motivate you to think about the "Goliaths" in your life and the "Seven Stones of Victory" used to defeat them, you have been the victim of moralistic preaching. The same is true whenever the primary intention of the sermon is to give you a Bible hero to emulate or a villain to teach a lesson, like "crime doesn't pay," or, "sin doesn't really make you happy." Reading or hearing the Bible in this way turns the Scriptures into a sort of *Aesop's Fables* or *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, where the story exists for the purpose of teaching a lesson to the wise and the story ends with, "and they lived happily ever after." In his *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has Screwtape writing Wormwood in the attempt to persuade Wormwood to undermine the faith by turning Jesus into a great hero and moralist.¹²

Walter Kaiser reminds us that while we do not need and cannot tolerate such moralizing in our preaching, "What is needed in preaching on such narrative portions is some method of pointing out the abiding meanings and continuing significance for all believers of all

times. This method we have already designated the syntactical-theological method of exegesis, which employs the special technique of principlization."¹³

Back again to the book under review, and again with regard to moralizing, Christopher J. H. Wright states: "Imitation of God is a strong theme in Old Testament law, but it does not stop there. It is the same basic principle that undergirds the teaching of Jesus about our behavior. We are to model what we do on what we know God is and does (Matthew 5:45-48; Luke 6:27-36). . . . So our preaching of Old Testament law should not merely be moralistic—focusing on the minutiae of behavior and burdening people, as the Pharisees did. Rather we preach the law in such a way as to point to the God who stands behind it, asking what it reveals of his character, values, and priorities. That seems to have been a thrust of Christ's preaching too. In other words, as with all Scripture, the question we need to ask before preaching it is not just 'What does this mean to me?' or 'What does this tell me to do?' Starting there can often lead to rather slim results in more obscure passages from Israelite life and culture. Rather we start by asking, 'What does this show of the character, action, and will of God? How is God revealed through this text and the surrounding context?' And then we go on to ask (and to preach), 'If that is what God is like, what God values, what God prioritizes, what God has done—what sort of response is appropriate in the circumstances in which we now live?'" (54).

On the other hand, Dr. Herschael York imagined the following brief dialogue in a class at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: "I preached four things not to do." "That's moralism." "That's okay sometimes." As long as we take into account authorial intent, contexts (paragraph, book, canon, redemptive-historical, literary, etc.), grammatical and syntactical matters, types, and other matters such as those addressed in the above paragraphs, then "four

things" to do or not do *may possibly, occasionally, sometimes*, be permissible as *secondary* (or tertiary!) application points. Then again, such moralistic preaching will probably be headed off at that pass called "Authorial Intent."

"Preaching Lament" (Chapter four by Federico G. Villanueva) was especially helpful and interesting. "Indeed, in her songs, testimonies, and prayers, the church only knows of praise.¹⁴ Billman and Migliore observe, 'Psalms of lament are poorly represented in the worship books of most mainline denominations. With notable exceptions, it would appear that prayer and worship in many Christian congregations fail to make room for the experiences of lament, protest, and remonstrance with God.'¹⁵ Ellington notes the emphasis on praise in his study of how testimonies are done in some groups of Pentecostal churches.¹⁶ While formerly they were spontaneous, testimonies have been censored in order to make sure that what is declared in public has the effect of 'building up' the congregation. A 'negative' testimony—one in which the problem has not yet been resolved—would not be a 'good promotion.' When it comes to prayers, these too tend to be limited to praise. . . . Why? Because you do not share something that has not been answered. There is no place for unanswered prayers in the church" (65).

Villanueva writes that in most laments there is an "emotional reversal," a movement from *lament to praise* (emphasis mine) (68). "From a pastoral and practical point of view, a one-sided emphasis on the movement from lament to praise can be detrimental to the life of faith. One may get the impression that a solution to one's problem is always underway" (69). And yet, isn't a solution always underway for the child of God? Yes! If not in the "now," definitely in the "not yet!" Thus we have hope. But we tread lightly, not in a cheap, cavalier, insensitive way to those who are still in the dark "valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4).

In the same chapter on lament there is a section entitled, "The reverse movement from *praise to lament* (emphasis mine): faith is not all about answers." Speaking of the brethren in Hebrews 11, the author writes, "These are people of faith for whom the following words of the psalmist were not fulfilled: 'I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his children begging for bread'" (Psalm 37:25) (76). Perhaps it would have been better stated, ". . . people of faith for whom the following words of the psalmist were *seemingly* not fulfilled." But in reality we do not need to engage in these semantics. The words of David in Psalm 37:25 were a testimony ("I have been young . . ."), not a promise, not a prophecy, which one could expect to be "fulfilled." Let us speak of a sub-genre of the psalms, namely, "testimony." We may offer as a rule of interpretation that the interpreter need not and should not look for fulfillments in testimonies, just as we do not look for commands in historical narratives. After a prophecy or a promise one might expect a fulfillment. After a testimony, one might expect an "Amen!" The purpose of a testimony is not that we might look for its fulfillment. Its purpose is to witness to the one hearing it.

Conclusion

Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching is not going to end up in my garage sale! As mentioned in the Introduction, the contributors come from diverse denominations and diverse countries. For the most part they come from traditions outside of North America. The footnotes listed books from publishers that I have never read. The book is valuable from that perspective. It also contains great content, especially the "how-to's" for preaching Christ from the various genres of the Old Testament.

¹According to <http://www.uca.org.au/>, which was accessed on July 4, 2012, "The Uniting Church is a union of three churches: the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of 'Australasia' and the Presbyterian Church of Australia. In uniting, the members of those bodies testified to 'that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church'."

²The following genres are given extensive attention in their own respective chapters: narrative, law, lament, praise poetry, wisdom, apocalyptic, and minor prophets.

³The Old Testament books upon which there is a special focus in this book are Song of Solomon (chapter seven), Isaiah (chapter eight), and Ezekiel (chapter nine).

⁴Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007), 272-330.

⁵Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 260-277.

⁶Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 185-231.

⁷Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 140-221.

⁸D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1995), 24.

⁹Scott M. Gibson, editor. *Preaching the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 17. This book is written in honor of Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., by his former colleagues and students.

¹⁰Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 135, 136.

¹¹D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1995), 2, 3.

¹²<http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/preachChristalone.html>. This site was accessed on July 5, 2012.

¹³Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 197.

¹⁴W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51.

¹⁵K. D. Billman and D. L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 13.

¹⁶S. A. Ellington, "The Costly Loss of Testimony," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* (2000), 48-59.