

*PREACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT*

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A Book Review

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by

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### **Introduction**

*Preaching the Old Testament* is written in honor of Walter C. Kaiser. It is edited by Scott M. Gibson, a former pastor. At the time of the writing of this book Gibson was a professor of preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. The eleven contributing authors have doctoral degrees in their field with ministry and/or teaching experience in the field of Old Testament. They also have Walter Kaiser in common; the contributors are his former students and colleagues.

### **Summary**

The editor states, "The purpose of this book is to help preachers cultivate a desire and skill to preach from the Old Testament" (26). The primary thesis of the book comes as a problem with a solution. The Old Testament has suffered at the hands of the seminary and the church. Pastors have not been adequately trained with the tools to prepare sermons from the Old Testament. As a result they avoid the Old Testament in their preaching. That is the problem. The solution is: "If the truth of the Old Testament is to sound again in churches, it must be from their pulpits" (15).

Let us first address the problem aspect of the thesis. Professors and pastors alike have contributed to the abuse and neglect of the Old Testament. The students and congregations alike have had to pay the price. In the Preface, Haddon Robinson laments the ways many schools treat

the Old Testament. It is not respected, not taken at face value, but rather treated as though it were a hodge-podge of random ideas assembled by ancient, unknown and unknowable editors. Even pastors who would defend, even die for the doctrine of inspiration ignore huge parts of the Old Testament in their preaching. They occasionally preach a psalm or draw (sometimes questionable) application points from familiar stories. But too often the older testament is a closed book for the pastor and (thus) also for the person in the pew.

It is a closed book, in part, because preachers do not know how to handle passages in which God embarrasses us. Albert Mohler touches on this when he writes:

Contemporary preaching suffers from embarrassment before the biblical text. . . . The persistent attacks upon biblical authority and the sensitivities of our times have taken a toll on the preacher's confidence in the actual text of the Bible. On the theological left, the answer is quite simple—just discard the text and write it off as patriarchal, oppressive, and completely unacceptable in light of an updated concept of God. Among evangelicals, we can be thankful that fewer preachers are willing to dismiss or discard the text as sub-biblical or warped by ancient prejudices. But even so, many of these preachers simply disregard and ignore vast sections of Scripture, focusing instead on texts that are more comfortable, palatable, and non-confrontational to the modern mind. This is a form of pastoral neglect and malpractice, corrected only by a comprehensive embrace of the Bible—all of it—as the inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God. All of it is for our good. As Paul said to Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable" for us (2 Timothy 3:16).<sup>1</sup>

The Lord sometimes says things that are not politically correct, that do not conform to our standards of what God ought to say or not say—as though we know anything! Indeed, God says things that we may feel are not proper. When one of my daughters was very young she would say, "I can't like it!" when a certain food did not appeal to her. Some dare say that to God—not in so many words—with regard to His words from Genesis to Malachi. Too often as a pastor I hear complaints about "all those names that I can't pronounce" or about how dry Leviticus is. But who are we?! Do we not fear God? We must tread reverently, "For it is no empty word for you, but

your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess" (Deuteronomy 32:47, ESV).

But alas, we make up our own "Canon within a Canon"<sup>2</sup> and only allow passages for preaching that don't raise eyebrows nor make listeners squirm (12, 13). We stay with the safe stuff. We use the Old Testament for illustrative material. Great men and women of the Old Testament become mere moral examples to us, disregarding the fact that the author intended that we learn something else from the text that we completely missed. We forget that the Old Testament was the only Bible that Jesus and the early church had. We skip the first two-thirds of the Bible. As Robinson writes, "Avoiding the Old Testament resembles strolling into the theater for the final act of a play and ignoring completely what the play is really about. It is to assume the playwright wouldn't expect anyone to take the first two acts of the play seriously" (14). That is the problem.

Now for the solution side of the thesis. In general terms it was given in the first paragraph above, namely, to let "the truth of the Old Testament . . . sound again in churches" (15). But how, specifically, do we let that happen? Gibson says in the Introduction, "This book is intended to give seminary students and pastors the tools they need to preach from the Old Testament. The focus of each chapter is on what it takes to prepare to preach a sermon. The emphasis is on preparation. The question that guided the selection of material and aided the authors in their writing is this: What do seminarians and pastors need to know as they begin to prepare to preach from Old Testament genres" (17)? Here, then, is a summary of those necessary tools: Reckoning with the challenges of Old Testament preaching (chapter one); keeping Hebrew language study current (chapter two); respecting and being informed by the genres of the Old Testament: history, narrative, law, psalms, proverbs, and prophets (chapters three through

seven); understanding the culture of the Old Testament, how to preach New Testament passages that cite the Old, how to preach in today's world, and how to preach the Old Testament evangelistically (chapters eight through eleven).

### **Critical Evaluation**

Jeffrey D. Arthurs wrote chapter four, "Preaching the Old Testament Narratives." He discusses "the thorny hermeneutical issue of preaching Christ from the Old Testament," and draws from Fee and Stuart along the way. Fee and Stuart teach that Hebrew narratives bring truth to us on three levels.<sup>3</sup> The top level is the macro-narrative (what some call The Big Story). The middle level deals with God's workings in the history of Israel. At the bottom level we set our sights "on hundreds of individuals as examples of virtue and vice. Thus, working from the bottom up, any particular story may communicate principles for holy living, the record of God's chosen people, or an aspect of redemption history" (74).<sup>4</sup>

Carol M. Kaminski noted in chapter three ("Preaching from the Historical Books") the story of Rehoboam in I Kings 12:15. In that text we are told the King Rehoboam did not listen to the people because it was a turn of events from the Lord in order to fulfill God's word spoken to Jeroboam. Kaminski states, "It is important to observe that the narrator does not give a 'moral principle' at the conclusion of the story, which could indicate that (such a) moral principle (would be) central to the narrative. Rather, the narrator reminds the reader that what took place was in fulfillment of the prophetic word to Jeroboam. This is because the division of the kingdom is being interpreted *within* (author's emphasis) the narrative, not as an isolated story that teaches a moral principle. This is, indeed, one of the challenges when preaching from the historical books since it is easy to find a 'moral principle' from the Old Testament that can be

applied in a church setting" (63). Thus Kaminski seems to contradict Arthurs (Fee and Stuart also) who admits and encourages that "bottom level" of "examples of virtue and vice." It should be noted that Arthurs is addressing the narrative genre while Kaminski addresses the historical genre. However, that probably does not matter, for in better conservative evangelical scholarship today such "moralizing" of biblical characters and events for the most part gets failing grades across the board in most, if not all, genres.

Laurence A. Turner agrees with Kaminski and give Arthurs' view only a weak nod of approval with Turner's use of the word *might*:

Wherever possible, individual micro-narratives should be preached as part of their macro-narrative. While a 'profiles of faith' type of series on one key episode each from the narratives of Abraham, Moses, Gideon and David *might* (emphasis mine) have some merit, far better to demonstrate that coherence of OT narrative blocks by preaching a sermon series on consecutive, contiguous episodes in the lives of just one of these characters. . . . Seeing this larger picture also has pastoral implications. Preaching a succession of disparate sermons on narrative highlights from the OT makes each a self-contained experience." These highlight reels of Old Testament characters and their exploits can move too fast and disregard context (as well as the author's intent in writing, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

And yet, with all that said, I cannot help but agree with Arthurs, that with Joseph in Genesis 39 "listeners can flee vicariously with Joseph from Potiphar's wife and perhaps flee twenty-first century temptation as well" (82). Granted, "Joseph the Great Exemplar" is not the main point of the story. But, if I have done a good job with attention to prayerful preparation, grammatical-historical analysis, genre, literary devices, plot, progress of redemption, progress of revelation, etc., then I think we *might* apply Joseph's example of fleeing to our lives today. We could perhaps apply it at a bottom level without engaging in mere moralistic preaching.

### **Conclusion**

*Preaching the Old Testament* has been valuable for my ministry already. I have bookmarked chapters on given genres to guide me in my preaching. I really appreciated Dennis

Magary's chapter on "Keeping Your Hebrew Healthy." He suggested many resources. I have purchased and am using Baker and Heath's *More Light on the Path* which gives a verse or two for each day in Hebrew as well as in Greek, including parsing forms (50). I have also acquired and am using Jonathan T. Pennington's *Old Testament Hebrew Vocabulary*, which is a set of two audio compact discs with a written word list. It contains all Hebrew words that occur twenty or more times in the Old Testament, along with definitions and pronunciation (36).

At the beginning the editor purposed to "help preachers cultivate a desire and skill to preach from the Old Testament" (26). While desire cannot be supplied by reading a book, skill can be supplied that way. I believe *Preaching the Old Testament* has fulfilled its mission to provide tools for the preachers to better equip them to "preach the Word" (Second Timothy 4:2).

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<sup>1</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Post-Modern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 18, 19.

<sup>2</sup>The word "canon" refers to a measuring rod. Canon is also the word that refers to the sixty-six books of the Bible. The books in our Bibles "measured up" to God's inspired standards and were thus included.

<sup>3</sup>Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 74-75.

<sup>4</sup>See Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>Grenville J. R. Kent, Paul J. Kissling, Laurence A. Turner, eds., *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 23.