

Wiarda, Timothy. *Interpreting Gospel Narratives—Scenes, People, and Theology*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2010. 245 pp. \$24.99.

### **Introduction**

Timothy Wiarda is professor of New Testament Studies at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, California. He holds degrees from Wheaton College (B.A., M.A.) and London School of Theology (Ph.D.). According to Golden Gate's web site, along with his many years of seminary teaching in the United States, he has over fifteen years of missionary experience in teaching, pastoral ministry, and tent-making ministry in Singapore and Algeria.<sup>1</sup>

The author brings a unique perspective to the study of gospel narrative in that he focuses (as the subtitle indicates) not only on theology but also on such matters as plot, story threads, and individual characters. Framing the book there is a meaningful *inclusio* that begins in the first paragraph of the Introduction (1) and comes full circle in the final chapter of the book (195). The content of that *inclusio* is the need for two testimonies: the testimony of the apostles, as well as the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, as essential in the proclamation and reception of the Word of God (see John 15:26-27).

### **Summary**

The author gives many pointers toward his purpose: "This book is about interpreting the testimony to Jesus given to us in the Gospels. The goal of such interpretation . . . is to see the apostles' portrait of Jesus as clearly as possible . . ." (2). The author continues, "I am writing especially for those who teach and preach from the Gospels. . . . (The) rationale for what this book is all about: exploring ways that we can enrich our Gospel exegesis. . . . This is primarily a how-to book. It discusses questions of exegetical method . . ." (2). Thus the purpose may be

summarized: The purpose of *Interpreting Gospel Narratives* is to help teachers and preachers learn how to see Jesus as clearly as possible in the gospel narratives by exploring ways to enrich gospel exegetical methods.

With regard to Wiarda's work compared to the work of others, let us first consider the work of Calvin Miller. He wrote chapter nine ("Narrative Preaching") in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*. In the first part of the chapter he deals with the strengths and weaknesses of the narrative form of preaching, that is, he deals with preaching narrative sermons, and reasons why or why not to do that. In the final part of chapter nine Miller discusses "Developing the Narrative Sermon." He addresses "arriving at a subject, text, and form for the sermon . . . with an arrival at theme and text, and in that order."<sup>2</sup> He gives tips as to "unresolved tension," a plot that is "tense but not complex," preferring verbs to adjectives, using "the best, well-rehearsed techniques of oral interpretation and dramatic enhancement," and "fitting the passage to the style."<sup>3</sup> Lest it seem that we are comparing apples and oranges (Is Miller talking only about inductive, narrative preaching from *any* genre while Wiarda is talking about narrative preaching from narrative gospel texts?), Miller's "fitting the passage to the style" shows that he is not advocating preaching narrative/inductive sermons all the time, even when the text is not a narrative. Though his chapter is valuable, it has a different emphasis than Wiarda. Miller focuses on narrative *preaching* (the very title of his chapter), a homiletical emphasis with very little on exegesis, while Wiarda focuses on *interpreting* gospel narratives (the very title of his book), with very little on homiletical how-to's and more on exegetical methods.

Chapter one of *Interpreting Gospel Narratives* is, "Are Gospel Writers Interested in Individual Characters?" The short answer is, Yes! Chapter two is entitled, "Story and Theology: What is the Point?" One of the author's points is that story and theology are not mutually

exclusive. A selection of the topics in chapters three through six includes allegory, allusions, primary and secondary figures ("individuals"), recurring themes, implications for practical ministry and theology, metanarrative, and of course, the two testimonies mentioned above.

### **Critical Evaluation**

Wiarda spends a large percentage of his time and energy focusing on individual characters within gospel narratives. Because the author has this focus, and because it is such a prevalent issue in theological discussion today, I too will take a large portion of this review to address the "character" issue.

As mentioned above, chapter one deals positively with the gospel writers' interest in individual characters. Chapter four likewise gives place to Jesus, secondary figures, and groups of characters. The author begins chapter one by saying that the chapter "contains initial steps toward describing the Gospel writers' interest in the people they portray" (8). The author goes on to say, "In rejecting the idea that the Gospels are like modern biographies, many interpreters have too quickly assumed that the evangelists display almost no interest in the personal traits and experiences of the people they describe—not even of Jesus himself, and thus even less of the more minor figures who fill the pages of the Gospels" (9). Consider Wiarda's balanced perspective on whether there is a place in preaching for a focus on the biblical characters from our preaching texts: "A second path that many have taken, and still take, is the popular tradition of character-based exposition. Within their repertoire of sermon styles, preachers have long included messages that analyze the experiences and personal qualities of Bible characters—sermons that could be loosely described as 'biographical.' But theological education has grown more sophisticated, and such preaching has been charged (often rightly) with numerous faults.

These range from an over-use of the imagination to the replacement of God-centered biblical theology with human-centered moralism. As a result of such unhealthy tendencies, students in today's seminary classrooms are likely to be cautioned against the excesses of Gospel-based devotional biography. Such warnings are certainly fair, though once again there is a risk of overreaction. There are actually good reasons to affirm at least some of the insights and instincts of character-focused preaching. For one thing, this tradition takes Gospel characters seriously. It sees their portrayed experiences as a means to affect the experience of those who hear the Gospels read and expounded. As for the devotional tone that typifies this style of exposition, why should we not expect well-rounded Gospel interpretation to reflect an integration of doctrine with feeling or experience? Nevertheless, many who approach the Gospels to gain inspiration from the lives of the people they portray do fall into traps along the way" (9; see also 136-7).

Professor T.J. Betts agrees with Wiarda's basic point. He stated in lecture that if we cannot get our morals from the Bible, then where should we get them? Ligon Duncan agrees with Wiarda as well. In Duncan's sermon, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, his eighth and final point is "Preach the Christian Life from the Old Testament." He said that as people urge us to preach redemptive-historically and christologically they make fun of exemplaristic, moralistic preaching, as they call it. The Old Testament was not given to give us a how-to manual for the Christian life, they say. They say you are not to learn how to be a godly man from Joseph. It is all about Christology. It is about redemptive history. You are not to learn from these events moralistic principles and messages to pound the people of God with today. As Duncan goes on to say, the problem with that assertion is that it goes directly contrary to Jesus and Paul. Jesus in Luke 17 said to remember Lot's wife. In 1 Cor 10:6 we read of Old Testament events—things that happened as examples to us. Paul sees a passage full of redemptive-historical, and

christological material and still sees moral exhortations fit for Christians that can be derived from that passage. So, Duncan concludes, preach the Christian life from the Old Testament.

Graeme Goldsworthy has an interesting perspective on biblical character studies. He is not apparently in agreement with Wiarda's view of the value and emphasis on the people portrayed in the Gospel accounts. Goldsworthy's view on individual characters weds those characters to biblical theology, specifically to genealogy: "The genealogy is the perfect antidote to a moralizing character study. Here is the reason why exemplary sermons on biblical characters can easily miss the point. It is not their exemplary value but their place in the theological plan of God culminating in Jesus of Nazareth that is the most important thing."<sup>4</sup> Goldsworthy's "*can* easily miss the point" (and "*most* important thing") somewhat softens his criticism of moralizing character studies. (By the way, I object to his phrase "moralizing character study." He goes on to define that as "exemplary sermons on biblical characters." The latter is a better way to describe the view he opposes. Calling it "moralizing" can be inaccurate, for not all use of morals is moralizing, just as not all use of typology is typologizing.) Haddon Robinson also weighs in against example-preaching, using careful language as he sends a caution in his book *Biblical Preaching*: "Another inadequate method of handling the Old Testament uses it *only* (emphasis mine) as an example or illustration of New Testament doctrine."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the word "only" is a key to settling or at least civilizing the debate and disagreement between the camps that differ with regard to the above matters.

A strength of Wiarda's view is its graciousness and balance. He sees a danger in focusing on Bible characters, but he sees great value as well. He sees legitimate reasons for concern, but he sees that many have over-reacted to those legitimate concerns.

The present book seeks to enrich gospel exegesis. It is not a stand-alone book. It does not get into grammar and syntax and hermeneutics. It leaves that to others, and that by design. The book is about *enriching* gospel exegesis, not teaching exegesis. The author assumes, since he is writing to those who preach and teach, that they already know how to interpret a passage, but that they could use the enrichment he offers. In fact, he says this very thing: "This book has a special focus. Rather than providing a broad general survey of the entire task of narrative interpretation, it zeroes in on . . . specific issues" (3).

### Conclusion

*Interpreting Gospel Narratives* was very valuable for me. I heavily highlighted and annotated it, and I look forward to reviewing and referencing it often. Given its format of chapter subsections that focus on gospel passages, this book could be used in a small group Bible study setting. It would appeal to eager and/or mature believers who are able to go beyond milk to solid food (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:12).

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<sup>1</sup>[www.ggbts.edu/faculty/bio.aspx?p=TimothyJ.Wiarda](http://www.ggbts.edu/faculty/bio.aspx?p=TimothyJ.Wiarda). Accessed December, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Duduit, ed. *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 112.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.* 114, 115.

<sup>4</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 225.

<sup>5</sup>Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching—The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 91.