

Pro Pastor

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Preaching the Whole Counsel of God

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**GRACE BIBLE
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY**

Editor's Introduction

Happily, over the past couple of decades, evangelical churches have witnessed a rising resurgence in verse-by-verse preaching of the Bible. At the same time, in pulpits across the globe, a renewed vigor on seeing Christ as the center of all of Scripture has reemerged (Luke 24:44; 2 Cor 1:20). Nevertheless, there are numerous books in the Bible that seem to have been forgotten. When is the last time churchgoers heard a sermon series on Leviticus? Or Obadiah? Or the tiny letter of 3 John?

This issue of *Pro Pastor* sets out to equip pastors, Sunday School teachers, and Bible study leaders in preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). If God's entire counsel to man consists of the Jewish Scriptures along with the apostolic and prophetic witness of the new covenant (Eph 2:20), it is imperative for us to reach into the treasure chest of all that God has provided. We have at our fingertips the entire Christian canon stretching from Genesis to Revelation. Accordingly, we ignore the "obscure" parts of the Bible to our peril.

If all Scripture is God-breathed and "useful" (2 Tim 3:16), it is possible and even probable that the people of God will not be taught, rebuked, corrected, and trained properly unless they have eaten a balanced diet of all the genres of literature that God has revealed. That diversity includes Scripture's stories and songs, its lineages and letters, its proverbs, prophecies, precepts, poems, and parables. Only when we gain exposure to God's whole counsel will we be sufficiently equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:17).

In the current issue of our journal, Brian Borgman provides wisdom on preaching the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), while James B. Law tackles the question of how to preach the Old Testament historical books (Joshua through Esther). Grant Castleberry teaches us tips for expositing the poetic books of the Old Testament (Job through Song of Solomon), and Jason S. DeRouchie uses the often-neglected book of Zephaniah as a case study for proclaiming the Old Testament prophets in a Christian manner (Isaiah through Malachi).

On the New Testament front, Maya Kuthyola and the present writer team up to discuss the profits and perils of preaching through the narrative books (Gospels and Acts), while Josh Buice supplies wisdom on preaching the letters or epistles (Romans through Jude). Finally, in this issue's closing article, Sam Waldron discusses the necessity of having good and proper interpretive principles in preaching the Apocalypse (Revelation).

The task before us is not an easy one! Preaching from all the fullness of Scripture will require wisdom, patience, understanding, skill, and meditation, fully marinated in prayer. But such is the noble task of preachers and teachers in Christ's church—to feed the sheep which our Savior bought with his blood, comprehensively—all to the praise of his glory.

JEFF MOORE
Editor

Preaching the Pentateuch

by Brian Borgman

INTRODUCTION—WHY PREACH THE PENTATEUCH?

Should modern-day preachers exposit the Pentateuch? A thoughtful preacher might wonder, “Why would I preach through the building of the tabernacle, let alone the book of Leviticus, when I struggle through those sections in my own Bible reading?” Certainly, Genesis is full of captivating narratives, although it has its challenging texts, like the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 37. Exodus 1–20 is also exciting, although chapters 21–40 are a bit taxing unless you are a lawyer or an architect. But Leviticus seems downright daunting. Blood, smoke, and entrails on the preaching menu? What more can we say other than Jesus is a better priest, and he offered a better sacrifice? How many times can we say that before the congregation beats us to the punchline? Numbers has a few chapters that seem sermon-worthy, but what about preaching the adultery test (Num 5:11–31)? How do we make sense of the laws concerning daughters making vows and the laws of inheritance? How could that possibly be edifying to Christians today? And what about some of the laws in the Pentateuch? Marrying a prisoner of war? Not blending two fabrics? Avoiding boiling kids in their mother’s milk? Oh my! And what about Deuteronomy? It contains some of the most graphic curses in the entire Bible (Deut 28:15–68). So why preach the Pentateuch? Doing so seems like it might invite a lot of homiletical hassle.

If we take the call to preach the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) seriously, then we must be committed to preaching the Five Books of Moses.¹ But I think the answer to “Why preach the Pentateuch?” is bigger than that. Daniel R. Hyde gives some compelling reasons to preach the Pentateuch. He notes, “We must preach the Pentateuch because these books are the foundational books for the rest of Scripture. The doctrines of creation, sin, redemption, covenant, election, and the moral law of God are all revealed here.”² Hyde’s point should not be underestimated. The Pentateuch is foundational for the rest of divine revelation, not just in the theological trajectories he mentions, but also in terms of the flow of redemptive history. Everything begins with Moses (Luke 24:27). The Pentateuch is foundational for Israel’s history, the prophets’ ministries, the promises of coming judgment and salvation, and ultimately the appearing of Jesus Christ.

Hyde also says, “We need to preach the Pentateuch because the stories within it are exciting, riveting, and heart-pounding. This is the backstory to the drama of Jesus.”³ Despite the several challenging passages, sections, and themes in the Pentateuch, it is filled with redemptive spectacles. Most of our Bible comes to us in narrative. We love a good story. Story engages the heart as well as the mind, since “God communicates in a way that grips the

¹ All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from *The New American Standard Bible* (NASB) unless otherwise noted.

² Daniel R. Hyde, *God in our Midst: The Tabernacle and our Relationship with God* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2012), 216.

³ Hyde, 216.

heart and moves the emotions.”⁴ As we approach the narratives of the Pentateuch, we get to tell the most captivating stories. The drama of those stories leads us to the best drama of all. As one author notes:

As we go deeper in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, a black-and-white grasp of the Bible’s message will increasingly give way to a vision of the gospel in resplendent color. These foundational books are the entry point into the biblical story that continues through the Old and New Testaments and gloriously concludes in the book of Revelation. Without the Pentateuch, there would be no first act in the grand drama.⁵

The drama of the story of redemption, through its unified salvific stories, challenge the preacher to match his exposition and delivery with the content he is preaching. Preaching the great dramas of the Pentateuch that lead to the gospel can help us become better, more engaging preachers.⁶ The preacher is turned into an expository storyteller. Diligent preachers must learn how to tell the story well, and to tell it in a way that does justice to the divine drama.

HOW TO PREACH THE PENTATEUCH

As we move to the vexing question of “how” to preach the Pentateuch, we will look at three essential aspects of preaching these books. The first aspect of preaching the Pentateuch is unity and storyline. Our discussion will emphasize the unity

of the Pentateuch and understanding where each section fits into the larger storyline of this section of Scripture. The second aspect of preaching the Pentateuch is preaching Christ from these books. We will briefly explore ways Christ can be faithfully proclaimed from this corpus. Although we will not dive into various methods, we will explore some basic principles and deal with the legitimacy or illegitimacy of exemplary preaching.⁷ The third aspect of preaching the Pentateuch is preaching Torah to Christians. We will talk about preaching the legal and moral codes that are unique to the Mosaic covenant and the dilemma of dealing with texts that seem far removed from us, historically, covenantally, and culturally.

1. Unity and Storyline

When approaching the Pentateuch, it is important to remember that there is both unity and coherence in the Five Books of Moses. Although it is not necessary to preach a series from Genesis to Deuteronomy, it is necessary to keep in mind that the five books comprise a single corpus. T. Desmond Alexander notes, “Although the books of Genesis to Deuteronomy are made up of very diverse components, which may superficially give the impression of lacking unity, someone has skillfully brought them together to form a narrative that exhibits considerable coherence and harmony. In its present form the Pentateuch is clearly a unified work.”⁸ John Sailhamer pushes the point even further, stating: “In any event, it is safe to conclude that the five-part division is early, and

⁴ Brian Borgman, *Feelings and Faith: Cultivating Godly Emotions in the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 45.

⁵ Ian J. Vaillancourt, *The Dawning of Redemption: The Story of the Pentateuch and the Hope of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 17–18.

⁶ Some stimulating works dealing with biblical narrative are Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student’s Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narrative* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1990); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. and upd. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011); and J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991). This is not an endorsement on everything these writers say, especially Alter and Fokkelman, but they do give some good insights on how narrative works.

⁷ The literature on the methods of seeing and preaching Christ from the Old Testament is rapidly growing, for example: Edmund P. Clowney, *Biblical Theology and Preaching* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1961); Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1988); Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); and Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007).

⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 114.

no doubt reflects a custom of writing large works on multiple scrolls. It is equally certain, however, that this division was not original. The original work was written as a single book.”⁹

The importance of this observation for preaching is clear. We cannot lose the forest of the Pentateuch for the sake of the trees of the stories. Therefore, we look at Genesis as the prologue to the Pentateuch. It sets the stage with creation, fall, redemption, the call of Abraham, and the creation of the Israelite nation. Genesis puts forth the themes of seed, land, and covenant, which will run like a river throughout the rest of the Pentateuch. There is a covenantal agenda from God, as covenants originate in Genesis but continue to develop from Exodus through Deuteronomy. That agenda goes beyond the Pentateuch, but it is foundationally defined and outlined in the Pentateuch. We could say that in one way or another, the headwaters of the Pentateuch flow throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

The unity of the Pentateuch requires that throughout the exposition of it, we must be mindful of where we are in the storyline. Vaillancourt asserts, “The best preparation to dig deeply in any section of the Bible is to gain a sense of the big picture.”¹⁰ The storyline is carried along by the narratives that are connected. One of the great questions for the expositor is to ask: Where are we in the storyline, and how does this narrative relate to the previous story and develop the next? One example of paying attention to where we are in the storyline and how the narratives connect is in the Joseph story (Gen chs. 37–50). As the Joseph story tragically unfolds in chapter 37, it is

an emotionally gripping tragedy that captivates us. But then it is rudely interrupted by the sordid story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. The sensitive reader wonders what just happened. The dad leading family worship with his little children wonders, “How can I explain this one?” But keeping the storyline in view, Genesis 38 demands that we ask further: What is happening in the text? Why is this narrative here? Did it get misplaced? Why leave off the Joseph story for this shameful story about Judah and Tamar?

Genesis 38 is an incredibly important chapter that connects to other texts in Genesis both backwards and forwards. Sailhamer notes that Genesis 38 “plays an important part in the development of the central themes of the book.”¹¹ Judah is a wretch who not only sleeps with someone he thinks is a prostitute, but he also does not care about the propagation of his own seed, let alone the seed promise. It takes a “righteous” woman to save the seed.¹² But there is even more. Judah, the self-serving son and wicked older brother, needs to be redeemed. The seed promise is narrowing and Reuben has been rejected as firstborn (Gen 35:22; 49:3–4). The problem for Judah is that he is a moral foil to Joseph and more closely resembles Esau. He needs redemption. In Genesis 38 we begin to see great reversals in the story. In some ways we could argue that the story of Joseph is not only about the preservation of Israel, but it is about the need for the salvation of Judah, and further, the salvation of the world (Gen 49:8–12).¹³

Not every passage will stand out like Genesis 38. The development of the storyline and the function of the passage within that storyline will yield some

⁹ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 2.

¹⁰ Vaillancourt, *Dawning of Redemption*, 19.

¹¹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 209.

¹² Sailhamer, 209–210. As for Tamar being a “righteous” woman or a woman “in the right,” Waltke notes that although most English translations render Judah’s comment as a comparative, “she is more righteous than I,” Genesis 38:26 “is better translated, ‘She is righteous, not I.’” Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 513–14. Once again, a woman is used to preserve the family line and to save the seed.

¹³ See Bryan Smith, *The Presentation of Judah in Genesis 37–50 and Its Implications for the Narrative’s Structural and Thematic Unity* (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2002).

rich expository material. Seeing intertextual connections and developments helps keep the unity and storyline of the Pentateuch in view.

2. Preaching Christ and Exemplary Preaching

One critical issue when preaching the Pentateuch is how we preach Christ. This is primarily a hermeneutical issue, but it has massive implications with the way that we preach specific texts.¹⁴ The issue of Christ-centered preaching has gained tremendous traction over the last several decades. There has been an increased emphasis on redemptive-historical preaching and a concomitant rejection of moralistic preaching. When we preach Christ from the Old Testament, there are a variety of helpful principles to see Christ.¹⁵ Jason S. DeRouchie gives one principle that is helpful: “See and celebrate Christ through the Old Testament’s direct messianic predictions.”¹⁶ In the Pentateuch we see a number of direct messianic predictions, such as Genesis 3:15 and 49:10–11, Numbers 24:15–19, and Deuteronomy 18:15–19.

By paying attention to the larger storyline, we can also locate our passage in redemptive history and see a trajectory. DeRouchie explains, “Scripture’s

entire story line progresses from creation to fall to redemption to consummation and highlights the work of Jesus as the decisive turning point in salvation history.”¹⁷ The trajectories of the storylines are helpful. What I have in mind here is described by Greidanus as “the way of redemptive-historical progression” and “the way of longitudinal themes.”¹⁸

Another angle on employing a Christ-centered trajectory is the use of typology.¹⁹ People, places, institutions, offices, and events provide patterns, and those patterns are often redemptive patterns that lead to fulfillment in Christ. Genesis 22 and the sacrifice of Isaac is filled with typology that lies very much on the surface. Sometimes, however, the typology is more subtle, for instance, in the case of Exodus 17:1–7 and the rock of Moses, where the people grumbled against Moses and put God to the test.²⁰

Another way to see Christ is to “see and celebrate Christ through Yahweh’s identity and activity.”²¹ Here we need to be especially sensitive to intertextual connections between the New Testament and the Old Testament. Resources with cross-references can be very helpful in this

¹⁴ See Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King, eds., *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022) for a recent discussion of the prevalent views. I hold to a Christocentric approach like the one advocated by Jason S. DeRouchie in this volume.

¹⁵ See Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); David Murray, *Jesus on Every Page* (Nashville: Nelson, 2013); Michael P. V. Barrett, *Beginning at Moses: A Guide to Finding Christ in the Old Testament* (Leeds: Emerald, 1999).

¹⁶ Jason S. DeRouchie, “Redemptive-Historical, Christocentric Approach,” in *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, eds. Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 188. This statement is capitalized as a subheading in the original.

¹⁷ DeRouchie, 188.

¹⁸ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 203–06, 222–24. These phrases are capitalized as subheadings in the original.

¹⁹ See Part 6, “How Did the New Testament Authors Use Typology?” in G. K. Beale, ed., *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994); James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible’s Promise-Shaped Patterns* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022).

²⁰ See Edmund Clowney’s brilliant insights on this text in Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1988), 109–28; Edmund P. Clowney, “God on Trial,” Trinity Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA, August 3, 2003, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/solo/epclegacy/sermons/112107040360/>; see also Julius Kim, “Rock of Ages, Exodus 17:1–7,” in *Heralds of the King*, ed. Dennis Johnson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

²¹ DeRouchie, “Redemptive-Historical, Christocentric Approach,” 189. This statement is capitalized as a subheading in the original.

area. But we also need to understand quotations, verbal parallels, and verbal allusions.²² Allusions are like the old gameshow “Name That Tune.” The contestant would say, “I can name that tune in two notes.” The two notes would be played, and the contestant then named the song. Allusions are one or two notes meant to recall the whole text. Consider, for instance, John 12:37–41 and its use of Isaiah 53:1 and Isaiah 6:10, the Suffering Servant and the Trisagion (“Holy, holy, holy”). The subtlety of John’s use is in John 12:47, “These things Isaiah said because he saw his glory, and he spoke of him.” In other words, John is saying that not only Isaiah 53 is about Christ, but that in Isaiah 6, Isaiah saw *Christ’s* glory.

Another example would be 1 Peter 3:15 compared with Isaiah 8:12–14. Peter is making a bold statement about Christ being Yahweh. Other allusions are even more subtle, but nonetheless present. For instance, Yahweh provides manna for his people in the wilderness (Exod 16:1–7). While Jesus provides bread for his disciples in desolate places (Matt 14:13–21; 15:32–39). As the preacher looks for those New Testament parallels and allusions, he will see Christ in Yahweh’s person and saving works.

Let me mention one more angle to preaching Christ. Based on redemptive-historical trajectories, we can identify what Bryan Chappel called “the fallen condition focus” of an Old Testament text, looking for the redemptive grace also found therein, and drawing a line of typology or trajectory forward to Christ.²³ The fallen condition focus will drive us to the redemptive answer in Jesus Christ.

But what about looking to the characters of the Old Testament as examples? If we are going to preaching Christ, can we also use the people of the Old Testament as examples, positively or negatively? Some say that expositors should never look to the characters of the Bible as moral examples and should exclusively preach Christ. But I am not altogether convinced that this is what is means to preach Christ or that there must be a sharp “either-or” dichotomy here.²⁴ Christ-centered preaching, or redemptive-historical preaching, is not void of exemplary preaching.²⁵

All one must do is look at 1 Corinthians 10 to see how both Christocentric preaching and exemplary preaching come together. Paul “Christianizes” the exodus and eating manna and drinking water from the rock in 1 Corinthians 10:1–3. Then, in a stunning moment of Christocentricity, he proclaims that the rock which followed the Israelites in the wilderness was Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Exegetical details and application aside, this is a profound statement. The implications of this declaration are tremendous. It is Christocentric to the highest degree. But then Paul makes application by saying that despite these remarkable privileges that the people of Israel had, God was not pleased with most of them (v. 5). Paul then states that these things happened to them as examples (*tupos*) for us (v. 6a). Then Paul gives us a list of examples that we should not follow (vv. 6b–10). Paul reiterates the point again, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (v. 11). Christocentric *and* exemplary proclamation of the Old Testament are found side by side in the same passage.

²² A good place to start is with “Index of Quotations and Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels,” *The Greek New Testament*, 5th rev. ed. (Munster/Westphalia: United Bible Societies, 2014). See also G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

²³ Chappel, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 269–328.

²⁴ See Brian Borgman, “You’re Not David! Or Are You?” blog article, Grace Community Church, Minden, NV, December 5, 2019, <https://www.gracenevada.com/youre-not-david-or-are-you/>.

²⁵ Exemplary preaching involves using the characters, usually of the Old Testament, as examples.

In James 5:16–18 we have an interesting, non-Christocentric, exemplary appeal to Elijah. In the context of prayer, James appeals to Elijah on the basis that he was a man “with a nature like ours” (Jas 5:17). James then states that Elijah prayed for the rain to stop and then to start again three years later, referring to 1 Kings 17–18. The point that James makes to his audience (and to believers today) is that even though we are not Elijah, we are *like* him, so we should *pray* like him! Elijah is exemplified not in his great prophetic office, but as a believer. He had the same human nature as we do. As such, Elijah the believer, who prayed, is an example to Christians who should be bold in prayer. There is a helpful distinction to make between Elijah the prophet and Elijah the believer, between David the king and David the believer. In their offices they point to Christ, but they were also believers, who serve as an example to believers nowadays who live at the end of the age.²⁶

The point is that preaching Christ from the Pentateuch does not preclude drawing application from the narratives. We need to be careful how we draw application, and our application needs to remain within an indicative-imperative structure, but it is not illegitimate to draw moral principles from the text. Nevertheless, the priority should be to point to Christ in the text. The narrative about Joseph and Potiphar’s wife is instructive on this point (Gen 39). We can talk about how this subsection of the narrative fits into the storyline of Scripture, we can draw parallels between Joseph and Christ, but we can also legitimately preach the ethical imperative from the narrative, “flee immorality” (1 Cor 6:18),

using Joseph as an example. There are biblical lessons to be learned from Joseph’s life on resisting temptation. Both the Christological and the moral can be preached from the text. These are not mutually exclusive approaches.

3. *Preaching Torah to Christians*

The next question that we need ask in preaching the Pentateuch is: How do we preach the legal material, especially the civil laws of Exodus and Deuteronomy? To begin with, it is helpful to remember that we are talking about torah, and torah means “instruction.” We can come to these parts of the Law and understand them first through the rubric of “All Scripture is profitable doctrine, correction, reproof, and instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). For those of us who believe in the third use of the law (Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, chapter 19, paragraphs 5–7), there will be many passages that are not problematic to preach. The moral law is still binding. To be sure, it is not always easy to distinguish between moral and civil laws.²⁷ As for civil laws, which are covenantally abrogated, the Second London Confession asserts that “their general equity” is “only of moral use.”²⁸

As we consider torah and its instructions in righteousness, we can see trajectories to Christ and his perfect righteousness.²⁹ In the tent of meeting and the tabernacle we see the great Immanuel (“God with us”) principle as work that will culminate with the Word becoming flesh and “tabernacling among us” (John 1:14).³⁰ What about the sanctions and penalties in Mosaic

²⁶ A helpful distinction is to determine whether the character is typological of Christ in his office or whether the character is an example to the ordinary believer. Sometimes *both* perspectives can occur in the same passage, for instance, David the king and David the struggling believer.

²⁷ A helpful resource is Philip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2010).

²⁸ 2LBCF 19.4.

²⁹ For some helpful and fascinating insights see Vern Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1991), 3–136; Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 152–65.

³⁰ See Daniel R. Hyde’s *God in our Midst*, which includes expositions of Exodus 25–40. Also see G. K. Beale and Mitchell Kim, *God Dwells Among Us: A Biblical Theology of the Temple* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

law?³¹ In the punishments of the law, we can see Christ's atoning death foreshadowed. The structure of promise and fulfillment, judgment and salvation, law and grace, can be traced through the torah.

The torah also serves to illustrate and instruct on the doctrine of sin and grace. The torah gives us a deep theology of sin. As Paul says, "Through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20). This is not restricted to the commands and prohibitions but is also illustrated in multiple ways.³² It is in the contexts of the Fall (Gen 3) or the Flood (Gen 6) or of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19) that we see the depth and power of sin demonstrated. It is in the context of the pictures of depravity, and the commands, prohibitions, and punishments that we hear the loud thunder of the law. But there is also grace. Grace abounds as God spares, restores, heals, and forgives.

There can also be applications of the principles of the Mosaic civil laws as examples of general equity. The amount of time that should be spent on these applications will vary based on one's presuppositions and convictions. But clearly the New Testament does not ignore these applications (e.g., 1 Cor 9:8–10).

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

We will conclude this article by considering different approaches to preaching and by making some brief practical observations. Tips also will be provided for preaching the books that comprise the Pentateuch.

Approaching Exposition

The preacher's approach to handling the Pentateuch will vary, depending on preaching goals, gifts, and the congregation's patience. One could legitimately preach the Pentateuch thematically. Although this would not be a consecutive expositional approach, it could be incredibly edifying. For instance, Ian Vaillancourt identifies nine redemptive themes in the Pentateuch that could easily be a starting point for a thematic approach.³³ Such an approach would serve as a biblical theology of the Pentateuch. A biblical theology of each book, that is, a thematic treatment of each book, would also be edifying.³⁴

Most of us, however, would want to preach through expositionally rather than thematically. The key to preaching expositionally is choosing one's preaching portion wisely. One could preach each book of the Pentateuch in an individual sermon.³⁵ This may serve as a solid foundation for digging deeper later on, especially if the congregation is not used to long expositions. Each sermon would be a survey of the book.

If we are going to move slower and dig into the text beyond a survey, we need to know the divisions of the books. We need to put serious thought into how we will divide those units for preaching portions. Certainly, there will be times when certain issues arise that demand deeper theological development, for instance creation, man as male and female, the image of God, or divine sovereignty. Conscientious preachers should not be

³¹ For a discussion of these issues, see Poythress, *Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, 139–286. Appendix B of Poythress's work deals with theonomy (311–61).

³² Robert R. Gonzales Jr., *Where Sin Abounds: The Spread of Sin and the Curse in Genesis with Special Focus on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

³³ Vaillancourt, *The Dawning of Redemption*.

³⁴ For example, Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3–103.

³⁵ For an example, see Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

afraid to do more intensive and detailed sermons on key issues that arise, but those should be carefully chosen. Otherwise, larger preaching units make more sense in order to avoid myopia.

Practical Tips on Preaching the Pentateuch

The first step for faithful exposition of the Pentateuch is for the preacher to immerse himself in prayer. Prayer and the help of the Spirit should be an essential part of our preparation. We should not approach the God-breathed Word mechanically, but prayerfully, seeking the illumination and help of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:14–16; Eph 1:18–23). As preachers we should be just as dependent on God in the study as we are in the pulpit. Pray for understanding of the text. Pray to see Christ in the text. Pray for wisdom to apply the text.

The second step for faithful exposition is to immerse oneself in the text. My sense is that many preachers do not spend enough time in the text before they jump to commentaries. Read and reread the book.³⁶ The books of Moses are long books, so maybe ten or twenty chapters in one sitting. Read through the book a few times to gain familiarity. Note patterns you see, ask good questions, observe potentially difficult texts or controversial issues (e.g., Gen 6, or slavery). Read with a pen or highlighter in hand (or whatever notetaking method you use).

The third step for faithful exposition of the Pentateuch would be to gain a broader perspective

and background. The background and big picture help keep the trees in perspective as you look at the forest. For example, you could read the chapters or articles on the Pentateuch in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* or in Victor P. Hamilton's *Handbook on the Pentateuch*.³⁷ There are also newer works on the biblical theology of individual books in the Pentateuch, which are very helpful.³⁸ These titles are only suggestive, and there are many good resources available today. Books like these will orient preachers to the divisions and major themes. It will alert them to challenging critical issues and provide a big picture.

Start to get a feel for where you want to drill down in the book and where you want to move more quickly. There are many issues today that will need to be addressed from a biblical perspective, so be willing take more time to unpack the theology and make application. One obvious area is in Genesis 1–2, where we find the creational foundations of gender and marriage. If we preach “God made them male and female” and fail to make connections to the issue of gender confusion and the LGBTQ+ movement, we are falling short in helping our people see the biblical worldview and its antithesis to the current spirit of the age. (The same could be said of the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18).

Using commentaries is important, but be judicious in your choices. Realistically, you will not consult a dozen commentaries every week. Think of your commentaries as your baseball lineup. Think

³⁶ Before I preached Genesis, I made a Pentateuch reading plan accompanied with John Sailhamer's *The Pentateuch as Narrative*. This allowed a slower, prayerful reading with insights from Sailhamer's book, which I wrote down and later used in my preparation.

³⁷ Miles V. Van Pelt, ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

³⁸ L. Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020); W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 28 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012); L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 37 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015); J. Gary Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 6 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

of your leadoff hitter, your two and three spot, and then your clean-up hitter. I would say that usually 4 to 5 good commentaries are sufficient. Choose commentaries that are: (1) based on sound exegesis; (2) sensitive to redemptive-historical or Christological issues; and (3) helpful for application. For me, my leadoff is always a trusted commentary that is not detailed but gives me a good overview of the text. Commentaries mainly provide quality control and can point out things I missed in my own exegesis. Finally, do not neglect the old masters like John Calvin and Matthew Henry. They often will have Christocentric and applicatory insights.

Finally, as you pray, as you study, and as you prepare, get ready to tell the story well. Engage the listeners with the power of the narrative. Make it interesting. Draw them in, explain the text, show them Christ, and apply the text to their hearts and lives.

CONCLUSION

Those who venture into preaching the Pentateuch, to whatever depth and approach they choose, will find a deep reservoir of foundational truths. They will find wonderful and true stories that inform the mind and grip the heart. They will find opportunities to have their own hearts and minds stretched as they seek to preach Christ and apply the text. As they move beyond the Pentateuch, they will find Moses's shadow all over the rest of the Old Testament and even in the New Testament. May God give us grace to preach the Pentateuch, as it comprises an integral piece in faithfully preaching the whole counsel of God. •

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Preaching the Old Testament Historical Books

by James B. Law

INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul declared his ministry commitments to the Ephesian elders in bold terms. On the Miletus beach, he reminded these beloved brothers that he “did not shrink from declaring ... the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).¹ Paul’s reference to “the whole counsel” refers specifically to the Old Testament and includes God’s redemptive plan in Christ revealed through apostolic teaching.

Neither Paul nor the Lord Jesus Christ ever questioned the authority of the Old Testament. We never find in the biblical record any dismissive comments about the veracity and importance of the Old Testament; rather, we read statements about their value and authority for God’s people (Matt 5:17–19; Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:1–11). Richard Pratt warned that “many serious problems in the church stem from a neglect of the Old Testament.”² Not the least of these is an incomplete revelation of the attributes of God and the depravity of man. Contending for the place of the Old Testament in

the life of the church is an important apologetic task, especially since certain contemporary efforts aim to dismiss the Old Testament from the Christian life altogether.³

My desire in this article is to offer a challenge to present-day pastors and teachers, and I pray it would be a compelling one, to bring the historical books of the Old Testament into the preaching and teaching ministry of the local church.⁴ In many ways, this argument should be easy to make. The historical books provide a fabulously rich world of discovery for the preacher and congregation who engage with the Old Testament’s historical narratives.⁵ Within this section of Scripture, David M. Howard Jr. reminds us that:

[M]any of the Bible’s most famous characters reside [here]: Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Ruth, Samuel, David, Esther. It is here that many of the Bible’s most famous events are found: the arrival in the ‘Promised Land,’ the sun standing still, Samson killing the

¹ All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student’s Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1993), xv.

³ Andy Stanley’s exhortation for Christians to “unhitch” themselves from the Old Testament was soundly critiqued in R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Getting ‘Unhitched’ from the Old Testament? Andy Stanley Aims at Heresy,” *AlbertMohler.com*, August 10, 2018, <https://albertmohler.com/2018/08/10/getting-unhitched-old-testament-andy-stanley-aims-heresy/>.

⁴ For the purposes of this article and its aim to help English-speaking preachers, we will follow the chronology of the historical books found in the English Bible, namely, Joshua through Esther.

⁵ David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 23.

Philistines or David killing Goliath. It is here that God's gracious promises to His people are given, affirmed, and reaffirmed: God's covenant with Abraham, His promises to David, His faithfulness to His loyal remnants in Israel.⁶

A grasp of this material is vital to understanding the message of the New Testament, and the church is impoverished by neglecting this section of God's word.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT HISTORICAL BOOKS

Admittedly, however, the Old Testament historical books present numerous challenges for modern readers. These books are often thought of as the "pots and pans" of the Bible: durable, but not very attractive. We recognize in reading the historical books that "we are separated from the biblical audience by culture and customs, language, situation, and a vast expanse of time."⁷ Who hasn't struggled with sections like the divinely ordered execution of the Canaanites in the book of Joshua? How do readers make sense of the heinous accounts of sin in the book of Judges? What are we to glean from the lengthy genealogies of 1 Chronicles 1–9? Even when these books are taught, there is a tendency for the text to be presented with misplaced personal application or an atomistic approach, thereby disconnecting the sermon from the richness of the text and redemptive themes fulfilled in Christ.

The pressures to be relevant in preaching are real. I was reminded of this a couple of years ago when teaching a seminary class on the historical books. During the semester, I had a conversation

with someone who asked sincerely, "What does a course like that have to do with the contemporary world?" "Fair enough," I thought. The question was a springboard into an apologetic on the canon of Scripture, the importance of redemptive history, and the mandate to teach the whole counsel of God. Indeed, the historical books provide an essential witness to God's unfolding revelation which culminates in the life and salvific work of Jesus Christ.

The conversation mentioned above also revealed the challenge every preacher faces in proclaiming the whole counsel of God to a generation who thinks these books are irrelevant. I am sure this challenge is not unique to our age, but our generation seems to think that we are the smartest and most significant group of people who have ever lived.⁸ Consequently, time given to ancient texts doesn't seem to be a priority on the list of life commitments.

Nevertheless, we are operating under the conviction that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ (Rom 10:17). The twelve books from Joshua to Esther (in the English Bible) represent about 25 percent of the text of Scripture and cover a millennium of redemptive history.⁹ Sidney Greidanus addressed this issue of relevance when he stated, "The word of God is indeed historically conditioned—how else could it be relevant?—but it is not historically *bound*; the ancient narrative can therefore become relevant again in the new historical situation preachers address today ... past relevance forms a bridge to relevant preaching of these narratives today."¹⁰ The historical books of the

⁶ Howard, 23.

⁷ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 24, Kindle.

⁸ Described aptly and famously by C. S. Lewis as "chronological snobbery" in C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1955), 254.

⁹ In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel (one book), and Kings (one book) are classified under the Prophets (*Nevi'im*), while Ruth, Esther, Ezra–Nehemiah (one book), and Chronicles (one book) are classified under the Writings (*Ketuvim*). Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 36.

¹⁰ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 223.

Old Testament are part of God’s “whole counsel” which must be proclaimed to our generation.

My appeal to those who serve on the front line of local church ministry is to help them bring the historical books into their preaching and teaching ministry. My hope is to offer a helpful background to these books along with hermeneutical and homiletical considerations. I will conclude with some practical preaching strategies.

THE HISTORICAL BOOKS CALL FOR EFFORT AND PERSEVERANCE

A call to preach is a call to prepare. The task of proclaiming the whole counsel of God involves a commitment to a lifetime of study and prayer. Perhaps the greatest challenge for the preacher will lay in faithfully expositing the historical books of the Old Testament. With respect to this section of Scripture, “few preachers (or other Bible readers for that matter) are truly familiar with the historical books.”¹¹ What is true of the preacher is often true of those in the pew.

T. David Gordon’s vivid picture underscores the need for preachers to give their best to understand the text and to proclaim it with conviction: “As starving children in Manila sift through the landfill for food, Christians in many churches today have never experienced genuinely soul-nourishing preaching, and so they just pick away at what is available to them, trying to find a morsel of spiritual sustenance or helpful counsel here or there.”¹² Preaching from the historical books tends to require a greater investment of time, due in large part to the sheer volume of material. Grasping the meaning of these

narratives demands more than a cursory glance. The calling is comprehensive as the preacher labors to be faithful to proclaim all that God has given to his people.

Why do the historical books tend to be neglected in the life of the church? Derek Thomas suggested one reason is because of short pastorates.¹³ With the average pastorate in the U. S. lasting on average four or five years, Thomas considered the likelihood was not high for pastors to engage in a sermon series through a large book of the Old Testament a few verses at a time.¹⁴ Time constraints and the accessibility of the New Testament prove to be deciding factors on why Old Testament material is often neglected. This omission breeds biblical illiteracy as the historical books are passed by because “preaching lengthy books seems an impossible choice.”¹⁵

I understand that there are compelling reasons for pastoral transitions, not the least of which are dysfunctional churches who really do not want faithful pastoral ministry and the teaching that flows from it. However, regardless of the length of one’s pastorate, instructing congregations on how to navigate the historical books is a golden opportunity to shepherd God’s people to enjoy the green pastures of these unfamiliar books. But *how*? Mastery of this section of Scripture would require reading nearly 250 chapters of historical narrative and doing the painstaking background study necessary to understanding the cultural context. I suggest that a helpful strategy for tackling this material is for the pastor or teacher to provide overviews of these books along with referencing key dates, major

¹¹ Paul House, “Preaching in the Historical Books,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 281.

¹² T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 17.

¹³ Derek Thomas, “Preaching from Lengthy Books of the Old Testament,” *Banner of Truth*, April 6, 2006, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2006/preaching-from-lengthy-books-of-the-old-testament/>

¹⁴ Thomas, “Preaching from Lengthy Books.”

¹⁵ Thomas, “Preaching from Lengthy Books.”

themes, and pivotal moments while engaged in disciplined expository preaching.¹⁶

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

The historical books of the Old Testament are not a hodgepodge of cobbled-together, disconnected stories. Nor are they merely a retelling of history with some entertainment thrown in to grab attention. These books are written with theological precision as they emphasize the power and purposes of the living God. The stories are placed strategically to bring God's people to a deeper understanding of his greatness and covenant faithfulness.

Following the chronology of the English Bible, some scholars note a dual history in this ordering of the historical books. The first rendering of Israel's history flows from the Pentateuch to the book of Joshua and extends to 2 Kings. The second perspective begins in 1 Chronicles and concludes in the book of Esther. There is repetition of events in both versions; however, the emphasis of the first perspective highlights the reason Israel went into captivity, while the second offers hope because even in exile, God is faithful to keep his covenant promises.

Joshua. Joshua 1 records the pivotal moment when the mantle of leadership passes from Moses to Joshua. Yahweh says to Joshua, "Moses, my servant is dead" (Josh 1:2), which is followed by a divine commissioning of Joshua to lead Israel into the Promised Land. What a message for God's people! Though Moses the mediator had died, God had not. He was moving his people forward to fulfill his promises for his glory and their joy.

Judges. Under Joshua's leadership, the post-exodus Israelites conquer the Promised Land.

However, the ensuing generation defect from God through their idolatry and unbelief (Judg 2:1–10). The book of Judges records Yahweh's verdict upon his disobedient people through recurring cycles of apostasy, judgment, repentance, and merciful deliverance. Reading Judges is startling and "is like having the insanity of sin rubbed in your face while God returns again and again with mercy, which was repeatedly forgotten."¹⁷ The period of the Judges covers a lengthy period of some 350 years which begins after the death of Joshua and ends prior to Samuel's rise to national prominence. The book ends with an ominous tone as Israel has set aside God's law and, in its place, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25).

Ruth. The book of Ruth is set within the period of the judges and describes the hardship of wayward commitments and bad decisions made while in a foreign country. Nevertheless, rich theological themes emerge of God-wrought conversion and the rising up of a kinsman-redeemer. According to John J. Yeo, "The cumulative effects of its literary artistry together with its theological profundity make the book of Ruth one of the most enjoyable yet instructive stories ever written."¹⁸ Within the darkness and poverty of the times, God's providence is on display as the line of the coming Messiah is preserved in the most unexpected way. For this reason, "Ruth should be regarded as a short story with an apologetic focus."¹⁹

1–2 Samuel. From the obscurity of the book of Ruth, Samuel's ministry emerges in the national spotlight at the end of the period of the judges. Samuel is a versatile leader who serves Yahweh as a prophet and priest. He provides godly leadership which brings national stability as Israel moves toward a monarchy. Samuel ends up anointing both Saul and David for their successive roles

¹⁶ Providing a congregation with significant Old Testament dates, a list of the kings of Israel and Judah, along with brief thematic descriptions of the historical books would go a long way in nurturing appreciation for books that can appear inaccessible and foreign. Additionally, a preacher could look for biblical illustrations from the historical books in his weekly ministry of the word.

¹⁷ John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 126.

¹⁸ John J. Yeo, "Ruth," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 399.

¹⁹ Yeo, 403.

as king. Saul, David, and Solomon lead a united kingdom, and each king rules for about forty years. This was the golden age of Israel, as her borders and prominence stretched to their greatest lengths and heights.

1–2 Kings. The record of 1–2 Kings provides the account of Solomon’s tremendous beginning followed by his spiritual decline (1 Kgs 1–11). After his death, Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, reigns but lacks wisdom to manage the tensions in the kingdom left by Solomon. Consequently, the kingdom divides into the ten northern tribes of Israel and the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The author of 1–2 Kings presents major events of the divided kingdom. He establishes that Israel follows a pattern of idolatry begun by their first king, Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:16). Under the divided monarchy, the northern kingdom of Israel never has a king who fears Yahweh and walks in his ways. As a result, with each successive king, Israel’s idolatry and covenant-shattering behavior escalates, leading to their defeat and captivity under the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

By contrast, the southern kingdom of Judah has eight kings who “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord” (1 Kgs 15:11). The last of Judah’s godly kings is Josiah (2 Kgs 22–23). Through Josiah’s reforms God’s people experience revival and blessing as the temple is repaired and the Passover is reestablished (2 Chr 35:1). However, when Josiah dies, Judah’s spiritual decline is rapid, leading to their defeat and captivity by the Babylonians in 586 BC. In 2 Kings 17, the author writes a clear summary describing why this happened, namely, “they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God” (2 Kgs 17:14–15). The people of Judah despise God’s statutes and his covenant, which leads to judgment in exile.

1–2 Chronicles. The second perspective of Israel’s history begins in 1 Chronicles. The tone and message provide more reason to be hopeful, especially as the narrative is written in the post-exilic period of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The sin of the nation is presented straightforwardly, but the storyline captures the solidarity of Israel beginning with Adam in 1 Chronicles 1:1 and moving to the fall of Jerusalem, the exile, and concluding with the edict of Cyrus (2 Chr 36).

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Even while in exile, God’s covenant faithfulness is demonstrated through his protection and provision of the Israelites returning to their land. This section of Scripture provides a summary of Israel’s history and concludes with hope that Yahweh is faithful and has not forgotten his people. His redemptive purposes will prevail.

HERMENEUTICAL CHALLENGES WITHIN THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

We have noted several challenges confronting both preacher and congregation when it comes to bringing the Old Testament historical books into congregational life. Another consideration involves hermeneutics, namely deciding what principles will be used to interpret these books. Jason DeRouchie describes the hermeneutical task before the preacher, “The Old Testament bears a historical particularity that requires Christian preachers to observe carefully, understand rightly, and evaluate fairly what is there before building a bridge to Christian application and the church.”²⁰ Hermeneutical discipline is required to understand what the text meant and what it means for those under the new covenant.

Basic questions must be asked by the preacher in the interpretive process: What did the text mean to the original audience? What are the differences between old covenant believers in the historical books and new covenant believers? What

²⁰ Jason S. DeRouchie, “Jesus’s Only Bible: 7 Tips for Preaching the Old Testament,” *The Gospel Coalition*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/7-tips-preaching-old-testament/>.

commands or principles are received from the text that transcend to all believers? How does this text fit within the tapestry of redemptive history? These questions and observations are asked concerning a genre that is largely narrative, which brings us to another hermeneutical consideration.

The Prominence and Purpose of Narrative

Roughly forty percent of the Old Testament is comprised of narrative. The biblical writers used this genre as a “heavy lifter” in communicating God’s word. Old Testament narratives are stories presented sequentially with a plot, characters, and theological purpose. These stories fit in the overarching metanarrative of God’s covenant dealings with Israel.

The Old Testament historical books differ from accounts of fiction or fable. These books were written strategically and intentionally for theological, doxological, didactic, aesthetic, and entertainment purposes.²¹ With such a wide range of function, it is not difficult to see why narratives are so prominent in the Old Testament.

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart observe that narrative doesn’t necessarily teach doctrines directly but “usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.”²² They record what happened and usually do not provide moral application or conclusions on whether the story was good or bad.²³ Narratives often require the reader to refer to didactic passages where “God has taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in the Scripture.”²⁴

Another challenge with interpreting narratives

involves the characters featured therein. Unlike old television westerns where the “good guys” wore white hats and the “bad guys” wore dark hats, Duvall and Hays rightly note, “The Bible deals with real life and with real people. People are complex, and so are the great stories about them ... One of the most common errors made in interpreting Old Testament narrative is to assume that everyone in the story is a hero, a model for us to copy.”²⁵ Yet the characters presented in the historical books are flawed, and by no means sinless. This is important because God’s grace is displayed as he uses imperfect men and women.

The Difficult Terrain of Narrative

Discerning the purpose of narrative texts takes time given to intentional reading. Shortcuts to interpreting narratives can lead to missteps in preaching. One common mistake is to lift the centrality of God from the text for a focus on the human character. For example, a study of the life of King David can be misplaced if the preacher builds up David’s virtues and then prescribes application as a moral code by which all should live. This diversion can distract our attention from the primary purpose of the event, namely insight into God’s character and what he is doing among his people. David C. Deuel counsels, “When preaching narrative, one should take the spotlight off the ... heroes and shine it on the only praise-worthy character in the story—God. Perhaps because of such a focus, those to whom he preaches will make God the focus of their life stories.”²⁶

Other common missteps in interpreting narrative texts include: (a) *atomism*, which isolates a

²¹ Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 3, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 68–71.

²² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 83.

²³ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 84.

²⁴ Fee and Stuart, 84.

²⁵ Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, 371–72.

²⁶ David C. Deuel, “Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition*, ed. Richard Mayhue (Dallas: Word, 1992), 287, Logos Bible Software.

particular truth of the narrative and seeks to understand it apart from the major theological point of the story; (b) *moralism*, which reduces the text to a series of lessons on what to do or what not to do in order to enhance one's life; and (c) *allegory*, which goes beyond the author's original intent in an attempt to find deeper meaning not clearly intended by the biblical writer.

To avoid such pitfalls, the preacher must engage in an interpretive process that is committed to exegesis using grammatical-historical-literary principles to seek the author's original intent. A second discipline would be the use of biblical theology which focuses on the perspective of the biblical writers and their understanding of earlier Scripture, redemptive history, and the events about which they are writing.²⁷ Finally, the preacher must apply the redemptive-historical hermeneutic which recognizes what the Scripture reveals concerning Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44).

HOMILETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: FROM TEXT TO SERMON

I have presented several challenges and missteps regarding our approach to the historical books of the Old Testament. My purpose has not been to discourage but to ignite excitement for this incredible preaching opportunity. Narratives grab the attention of young and old alike. These stories pull us in as they describe real life, real problems, real emotions, and complex realities. They are also perennially relevant as they speak to any generation and do so with compelling authenticity. It is little wonder that God in his wisdom chose to reveal his truth to us using these historical narratives.

A Homiletical Approach to the Historical Books

In the remainder of this article, I would like to focus on some homiletical considerations and preaching strategies as present-day pastors and teachers consider embarking on a possible sermon series from the historical books. Faithful preaching requires disciplined sermon preparation. Homileticians are in general agreement that steps to faithful preaching require a series of decisions regarding the selection and study of the biblical text followed by the development of sermonic form.²⁸ For our purpose, I want to focus on the selection of texts for a sermon series in the historical books of the Old Testament.

Selecting texts is a personal matter as it involves the preacher's study and his understanding of his congregation's needs. It can also be overwhelming as a "paralysis by analysis" hits the preacher trying to make his way into this section of Scripture. Many options are available in considering texts for sermons. Let me suggest three for the historical books: (1) a panoramic treatment; (2) a selective approach; or (3) a consecutive approach. I have found that these give needed flexibility on how to handle such a large section of the Bible, and they liberate from a "Homiletical Phariseeism" that insists faithful preaching is only done one way.

Panoramic Treatment of a Historical Book

Earlier I referred to a possible neglect of the Old Testament historical books because of short-term pastorates and increased biblical illiteracy among congregations. The panoramic treatment of a Bible book is a wonderful tool for a pastor to use to orient the congregation to the historical books. By "panoramic," I'm referring to the entire book of the Bible being used as the text for the sermon.

This approach allows a pastor to expose the church to a full landscape of themes from a biblical book

²⁷ James M. Hamilton Jr., *What is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 15–16.

²⁸ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 279–80. Greidanus provides a helpful ten-step preparation list for developing Christocentric sermons from the Old Testament text. I would also recommend Benjamin H. Walton, *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2016). Walton provided an accessible hermeneutical and homiletical plan for pastors wanting to develop their preparation skills in this genre.

in one sermon. Over a period of several years, I preached a sermon from every book of the Bible using this approach. Our congregation responded with appreciation for that journey in which they were able to see the major themes of Scripture through an overview.

Mark Dever made a tremendous contribution to preaching in his work, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made*.²⁹ In this work, Dever uses the panoramic approach through the Old Testament. His sermon on the book of Ezra is illustrative of how to bring the message of this book to meet the needs of a contemporary congregation. The message was entitled: “The Message of Ezra: Renewal.” Dever provided the following overview of Ezra:

Title: “The Message of Ezra: Renewal”

Is the Church Becoming Invisible?

Introducing Ezra

- I. God’s Hand Restores (Chapters 1–6)
 - The Return
 - The Restoration of the Sacrifices
 - The Rebuilding of the Temple
 - Foundation
 - Opposition
 - Completion
 - God’s Sovereign Hand
 - Prayer
- II. God’s Word Reveals (Chapters 7–9)
 - The Word Restored to the People
 - The Word Exposing the Sins of the People
- III. God’s People Repent (Chapter 10)
 - Confession and Sorrow for Sin
 - Repentance and Change

Conclusion: Will the Church Become Visible?³⁰

I am a strong advocate of the panoramic approach to preaching because it facilitates God’s people seeing the big picture of Scripture that might otherwise be neglected because of the tyranny of time or the absence of biblical literacy.

Selective Treatment of a Historical Book

A second approach is the selective treatment of a particular book which also gives the preacher discretion in how material is used. The content of the historical books is immense, and pastor-teachers could feel shackled by an all-or-nothing approach to these books. And so, with resignation, a pastor says, “If I can’t deal with the biblical book completely, I’m not going to deal with it at all.”

The selective treatment, like the panoramic approach, lends itself to greater freedom in preparing messages over a vast section of Scripture. Employing the selective treatment provides the preacher with an opportunity to preach shorter sermon series that are targeted on a theme (or themes) of the book.

To provide an example from 1–2 Kings, sermons could be developed from 1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 2. These chapters are commonly referred to as the “Elijah and Elisha narratives.” Their prophetic ministries, from start to finish, were an impassioned plea for the northern kingdom of Israel to turn to the living God. They warned against idolatry and predicted the certainty of judgment that would come because of it. This section is filled with sermonic treasures.

Another consideration would be a sermon series on the godly kings of Judah. There were only eight who were identified as doing right in the sight of the Lord: Asa (1 Kgs 15:11), Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 17:3), Jehoash (Joash) (2 Kgs 12:2), Amaziah (2 Chr 25:1–2), Uzziah (2 Chr 26:1–5), Jotham (2 Kgs 15:32–34), Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:1–6), and Josiah (2 Kgs 22–23). These accounts provide episodes that

²⁹ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

³⁰ Dever, 386.

remind us of our need to trust God when pressures tempt us to do otherwise. Redemptively, we are reminded that all earthly kings, even those who are godly, fall short of the King of kings who is the promised one to come.

Consecutive Treatment of a Historical Book

A consecutive treatment of the text would be a progression through the biblical book with greater detail to a verse-by-verse exposition. The historical books of Joshua, Ruth, and Nehemiah would be good candidates for a more detailed treatment or extended sermon series. A consecutive approach for the book of Joshua could include the following outline, sermon texts, and titles:

The Promised Land at Last—Joshua 1:1–5:15

- #1 Be Strong and Very Courageous: The Call of Joshua (1:1–18)
- #2 God’s Grace for the Nations (2:1–24)
- #3 God’s Presence and Power in Crossing the Jordan (3:1–17)
- #4 Stones of Remembrance (4:1–24)
- #5 The Lord is our Strength (5:1–15)

Engaging in the Battle—Joshua 6:1–12:24

- #6 Jericho (ch. 6)
- #7 Sin in the Camp (ch. 7)
- #8 Returning to Covenant Faithfulness (ch. 8)
- #9 The Danger of Leaning on Our Own Understanding (ch. 9)
- #10 A Day of Days (10:1–14)
- #11 Decisive Victory (11:1–23)

Possessing What God Has Given—Joshua 13:1–22:34

- #12 Dangers That Keep Us from Complete Obedience (chs. 13–17)
- #13 Standing on the Promises (14:1–17)

Who Will We Follow and How Will We Live—Joshua 23:1–24:33

#14 Owing Our Failures and Pressing on in Grace (23:1–24:13)

#15 As for Me and My House (24:14–15)

#16 Squandering Grace (24:16–33)

Prayerfully moving through the text, the preacher will need to make decisions about how to package the message homiletically. Deuel’s counsel is helpful for preachers looking for sermonic form in narrative texts: “Whether he does this with points of the sermon or with pauses for elaboration at the text’s points of emphasis is a matter of individual judgment. But by preaching the story, the expositor can simplify a potentially complex task of representing patterns and preserve the narrative’s patterned quality most effectively.”³¹ Learning to narrate the stories of Scripture should be a growing discipline in a preacher’s ministry.

CONCLUSION

Whether one uses the panoramic, selective, or consecutive approach, “the need to preach the *whole* Bible remains paramount, particularly in an increasingly biblically illiterate church.”³² The Old Testament believers were called to the obedience of faith through these inspired narratives. The writer of Hebrews certainly believed the accounts from the historical books were vital to the church and worthy of repetition. He concluded Hebrews 11, commonly known as “The Faith Chapter,” with a showcase of events and personalities from this section of Scripture (Heb 11:30–34) as they looked to God as their ultimate reward. May we follow that example and be faithful to pass on the whole counsel of God to our generation, a generation that needs reminding of how great and awesome our God truly is. •

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³¹ Deuel, “Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative,” 278.

³² Thomas, “Preaching from Lengthy Books.”

Preaching the Poets

by Grant Castleberry

INTRODUCTION

In modern Protestant Christianity, where so much of preaching has been reduced to emotional, self-help platitudes or a much too-long “intro story” followed by three points only tangentially related to a biblical text, it is not surprising that expositions of Old Testament books remain largely neglected as untapped gems. This reality is especially true of what are called the “poetic books”—the wisdom and lyrical books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon which lie between the historical books and prophets in the English Bible.¹ These poetic books vary greatly in both form and content from the books which precede and follow them.²

To embark upon major preaching studies in these books not only requires the skill of interpreting ancient Hebrew poetry, but also hard work, creativity, and serious commitment. Preaching the poetic books is hard work because we must apply the interpretive skills necessary to interpret ancient Hebrew poetry, and we must affirm a hermeneutic that interprets the poetry in view of Christ and New Testament revelation. It requires creativity in the sense that poetic literature is often repetitive and recursive. Themes are revisited again and again, so creativity is required in order

to articulate them in a fresh way to our hearers. Serious commitment is required because the poetic books can be challenging to communicate.

All of the poetic books present unique demands in preaching. Job is a dense forty-two chapters, and it is a book that requires keen discernment—some of Job’s counselors’ advice is biblical, while much of it is simply based on the mistaken idea that God always brings suffering as a direct result of one’s sinful actions. The Psalms, by word count, constitute the third longest book in the Bible, and thus, it is not a small amount of material to master. Proverbs presents the challenge of putting together a unified sermon series on pithy couplets, as found in the bulk of the book in 10:1–29:27. Song of Solomon requires tact in presentation as it is probably more suited for an adult audience, as Tommy Nelson used to do with his Song of Solomon seminars in the 1990s. Finally, Ecclesiastes presents the utter futility and meaninglessness of “life under the sun” apart from God.

WHY PREACH THE POETIC BOOKS?

When we consider the value of the poetic books and look at what they offer, we will find that they are the needed antidote to much of what is wrong in our postmodern culture and in the

¹ T. D. Alexander writes, “‘Wisdom’ applies to Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, and ‘lyrical’ relates to Psalms and Song of Songs.” T. D. Alexander, “The Wisdom and Lyrical Books,” in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 896.

² Alexander notes, “These five books differ noticeably in content and style from all the other books of the OT as well as from one another. They are the principal representatives in the OT of what is now known as wisdom and lyrical literature.” Alexander, 896.

contemporary church. As I was thinking through this article and my own preaching ministry, I began meditating on what the poetic books offer the church today and why we should preach them. The following principles are my rationale for *why* it is important to preach the poetic books:

1. ***We are commanded to preach the poetic books.*** Paul reminds us, “*All Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17).³ All Scripture is required to make God’s people complete! God knows what his people need better than we do. The poetic books help the Christian grow in their praise to God (Psalms), in marital relationships (Song of Solomon), and in understanding how to live wisely amid the cracks and jagged edges of life (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes).
2. ***The character of the Word of God is revealed in the poetic books.*** Psalm 19 and Psalm 119 are perhaps the clearest and fullest accounts of the character of God’s special revelation of the Word of God. Psalm 19 begins with an account of general revelation through creation (Ps 19:1–6). Yet general revelation can only take the believer so far. In verse seven, David begins to describe the Word of God. It is “perfect, reviving the soul” (Ps 19:7). It is “sure, making wise the simple” (Ps 19:7b). David continues on in his amazing description of God’s Word with six different descriptions

and effects that the Word has in the life of the believer. David concludes this section of the Psalm by describing his desire for the Word of God: “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps 19:10). Meanwhile, Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the entire Bible, and it is dedicated to the character of God’s law (*torah*). The poem is an acrostic, with twenty-two stanzas, which each begin sequentially with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The psalmist uses the covenant words for God’s Word, found in Deuteronomy, to show God’s covenant-keeping people the nature of the Word of God for the path of life.⁴

3. ***A fuller picture of Christ is seen in the poetic books.*** The poetic books help us see and understand Jesus Christ in greater clarity. Many of the Psalms are messianic. In fact, the Hebrew word from which we get our English word *Messiah*, which means “anointed,” is used in Psalms 45 and 89.⁵ Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 come to mind as important psalms picturing the reign of the Lord’s anointed. The book of Psalms begins by declaring that the “nations” are the Messiah’s “heritage” and the “ends of the earth” are his “possession” (Ps 2:8). Psalm 22 and Psalm 69 are quoted in reference to the Lord’s suffering on the cross (cf. Matt 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:24; 28). Jesus told his disciples that Psalm 35:19 was fulfilled in his ministry because he was hated “without a cause” (John 15:15).

³ All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

⁴ C. John Collins remarks about Psalm 119: “The psalm uses a number of terms for God’s covenantal revelation: ‘law’ (v. 1: Hb. *Torah*, i.e., instruction); ‘testimonies’ (v. 2: Hb. *’edot*, i.e., what God solemnly testifies to be his will); ‘precepts’ (v. 4: Hb. *Piqqudim*, i.e., what God has appointed to be done); ‘statutes’ (v. 5: Hb. *Khuqqim* and *khuqqot*, i.e., what the divine Lawgiver has laid down); ‘commandments’ (v. 6: Hb. *Mitswot*, i.e., what God has commanded); ‘rules’ (v. 7: Hb. *Mishpatim*, i.e., what the divine Judge has ruled to be right); ‘word’ (v. 9: Hb. *’imrah* and *dabar*, i.e., what God has spoken). Except for “precepts” (which appears only in the Psalms), all of these words can be found in Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut. 4:8, 44–45; 6:1; 33:9), and denote God’s Word, focusing on its role in moral instruction for his people.” C. John Collins, “Psalms Notes,” in *ESV Study Bible*, eds. Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 1093.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 887.

Meanwhile, Proverbs shows us the very wisdom that Christ displayed in daily situations throughout the entirety of his earthly life. Jesus calls himself the “wisdom of God” in Luke 11:49. Paul said that in Christ “are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). They give us insight into his character. In the book of Job, though Job was “blameless” before the Lord, he was tested through suffering. Christ, who is completely blameless, took on suffering and tribulation infinitely greater than Job’s. Christ endured the shame and agony of death by crucifixion. The just died for the unjust. Job ponders: Why does God permit such suffering? Yahweh reveals his insight to us at the foot of the cross.

- 4. True wisdom is defined in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.** God’s wisdom is different from man’s wisdom. The wisdom literature of the Bible—though not unique in form in the ancient world (there are other examples of ancient Near East wisdom literature)—is utterly unique in how it defines wisdom. Wisdom is not merely practical; it is the skill of living *coram Deo*—before the face of God. True wisdom is God-centered ethics.⁶ It is the skill of living a godly life. The book of Job reminds us that wisdom can be found nowhere else but in God. Therefore, true wisdom can only be gleaned from special revelation: the Word of God.⁷ Solomon reiterates to his readers in Proverbs, “The fear

of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov 9:10; cf. 1:7; 30:3). Solomon also sums up the path of wisdom in Ecclesiastes: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:13, 14).

- 5. The Psalms instruct us in how to properly worship Yahweh.** The Psalms in particular are the hymn book for the people of God. Psalm 1 is the “garden gate,” which guards Yahweh’s true worship from imposters.⁸ Psalm 16 gives us insight into the general principle of worship: it involves the whole heart all the time! David writes, “I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken” (Ps 16:8). The result of right worship is joy which overflows in the heart. As a result of right worship, David says, “The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance” (Ps 16:6). For this reason, the Psalmist says in Psalm 84, “My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God” (Ps 84:2). Worship results in the highest joy for the worshiper, because ultimately, we were designed to worship our Creator.

In order for us to approach God properly, sometimes repentance is necessary, so within the Psalms there are seven prayers of penitence

⁶ R. Laird Harris, “Wisdom Literature, Old Testament,” in *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, eds. Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 1815.

⁷ Waltke writes, “The theological significance of the Old Testament rests rather on ethical monotheism: the connection of all its literature with the rule of I AM according to his covenant commitments. The theological significance of Proverbs lies in its affirmation that I AM brought ‘wisdom’ into existence, revealed its teachings to humanity, and as Guarantor upholds the moral order that is revealed in it.” Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 903.

⁸ Waltke delineates the important purpose of the first Psalm: “Psalm 1 functions as a garden gate, protecting Israel’s sacred hymns against abuse. A problem inherent in liturgy is that it tempts humanity to rigidity and manipulation. Given to magical rituals, some worshipers throughout history have turned religion into a way to get what they want from God. Others have assumed that God is interested only in the proper execution of religious procedures without a corresponding life that is attentive to him. Psalm 1 anticipates these problems. Before entering the Psalter, one must say a hearty ‘Amen’ to Psalm 1. Only the covenant keeper can enter and dwell in God’s presence (Pss. 15 and 24), and only those that delight in the Torah can enter the congregation of the righteous who sing the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of the Psalter.” Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 885.

(see Pss 6; 25; 32; 51; 130; and 143).⁹ As we walk in the of the “law of the LORD” (Ps 1:2), guided by our Shepherd (Ps 23), we are opposed by the “wicked” who scoff at Yahweh and his people (Ps 1:1; see also 2:1; 73:3). The Psalmist shows us how to pray prayers which express “moral indignation,” not rooted in vengeance or personal revenge, but out of a desire to see Yahweh’s reign advance in the Messiah (see Pss 5; 35; 58; 59; 69; and 109).¹⁰

In other situations, we lament the difficulties in our own lives and the perceived lack of God’s kingdom advancing in a fallen world. The “Psalms of Lament,” which make up a third of the Psalter, teach us how to worship and pray in the midst of suffering.¹¹ Finally, we must mention Psalms of thanksgiving and praise (see Pss 8; 9; 30; 93; and 145). These Psalms teach us how to properly worship God with all of our hearts. They teach us the essence of God-centered Christianity. They help us lift our voices to the praise of Yahweh in all contexts—privately, in our families, and in the congregation of believers.

6. *Proverbs and Song of Solomon give us a wonderful picture of biblical sexuality.* In a world where sex has been perverted and distorted with gross immorality, it is vital to remember that God designed sex to be enjoyed in the covenant of marriage (Prov 5:18–21; Song of Songs). Solomon reminds us that “A man’s ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths” (Prov 5:21). The LORD discerns even the way we engage in marital intimacy. It is striking to note that the LORD saw Onan’s actions, in not giving

his wife, and therefore his brother, children, and Moses remarks, “What he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also” (Gen 38:10). Clearly God cares very much about the “marriage bed” (Heb 13:4). Proverbs and Song of Solomon give us wisdom in how we are to keep the “marriage bed” pure and find delight in this gift, all for God’s glory. There, these desires are “awakened” for his honor (Song 8:5).

7. *Job teaches us how to trust God in suffering.*

Suffering is a mystery in the life of the believer, and Job is one of the great examples of a “righteous man” who faces unimaginable suffering (Job 1–2). The great question throughout the book, which Job and his four friends deliberate, is “Why?” Why do the godly suffer in this life? God’s response to Job doesn’t provide clear answers to his questions and earlier postulations. Rather, God reminds Job that he is the Creator of “the foundations of the earth” (Job 38:4), and Job is completely ignorant of the grand ways of the Lord. “Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this,” God says to Job (Job 38:18). Then God reminds Job of his sovereign rule over creation, specifically with regard to various animals. God reminds Job that he is sovereign and all-powerful (Job 39–40).¹² In the end Job must learn (along with the reader) to entrust his circumstances to the hands of Almighty God. In the end justice will prevail. In a sense Job’s restoration is the story of every Christian. Even if we don’t see earthly restoration in the present life, we will all be restored with resurrection bodies in the new heavens and new earth (Isa 65; Rev 21–22).

⁹ Collins, “Psalm Notes,” 940.

¹⁰ Collins, 938.

¹¹ Collins, 940.

¹² Harris and Konkel make a great observation on Job’s previous deductions: “While Job had rightly defended himself against his friends’ accusations of sin and had defined his circumstances as being governed by God, he had drawn conclusions about what his affliction meant that did not account sufficiently for what was hidden in the knowledge and purposes of God.” Kenneth Laing Harris and August Konkel, “Job Notes,” in *ESV Study Bible*, eds. Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 926.

8. Ecclesiastes depicts the futility of life apart from God. Ecclesiastes is timeless. It could just as well have been written for today's news feeds. In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Michael Eaton states, "Life in the world does not fundamentally change, and we do not need a date for Ecclesiastes in order to receive its message. It is part of the genius of the Preacher's thought that it stands on its own feet any time and in any place."¹³ The purpose of the book is apologetic. It shows the futility of living life apart from God.¹⁴

A HOW-TO GUIDE IN PREACHING THE POETS

The books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon feature their own idiosyncratic components and present unique challenges for the task of preaching. The following notes are intended to aid expositors in preaching texts from each respective book.

Job

Job is a difficult book to preach because the majority of it is comprised of dialogue and speeches made by Job's friends followed by Job's responses to them. The difficulty for the expositor is that there is much truth in the advice of Job's friends, yet it is misdirected at Job and contains a short-circuited view of suffering—as something which always results from God's displeasure. Furthermore, the book of Job contains both narrative portions and poetry; the narratives are found in Job 1:1–2:13 and Job 42:7–17 with the poetry portion in-between.

The key in preaching the book of Job is not to get bogged down with the speeches of Job's friends and Job's replies. John Calvin preached 159 sermons in Job. The Puritan, Joseph Caryl, famously preached 424 sermons on Job!¹⁵ Though

I'm sure the individual sermons were profitable for their hearers, such an extended study seems to miss the forest for the trees. I think the key lesson for God's people from Job is seeing the almighty sovereignty of God, which is presented in God's response to Job in chapters 40–41. Job's response in chapter 42 is fitting for all Christians: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Job then repents "in dust and ashes" for questioning God's purposes, realizing that God's ways are simply beyond our ways as human beings (Job 42:6).

A good preaching strategy, then, would be to move through chapters 3 to 39 rather quickly with summary sermons. There are three sets of dialogues in which Job's friends give speeches and then Job responds. These could be covered with sweeping summary sermons so as to move through the material quickly and not lose the momentum of the initial chapters as attention is drawn toward the awesome climax in the conclusion. Even so, Job's responses in chapters 21 (regarding why the wicked seem to prosper), his uplifting of the majesty and greatness of God in chapter 26, and his famous investigation into the source of wisdom in chapter 28 demand special focus.

Psalms

I believe that the book of Psalms should be preached regularly since it functions as the church's hymn/prayer book. The psalms give us the rubric for how to praise and to call out to God in prayer. Because each Psalm stands alone, there is no need to try to preach sequentially through the Psalms, though certainly one could. Rather, I think the best course of action is to return to the Psalms periodically between sermon series, so that our people are regularly returning to the Psalter.

¹³ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 17.

¹⁴ Eaton, 44.

¹⁵ Nick Batzig, "The Hard Job of Interpreting Job," *Place for Truth*, January 23, 2018, [https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/the-hard-job-of-interpreting-job#:~:text=The%20Puritan%20Joseph%20Caryl%2D%2D,period%20\(1643%2D1666\)](https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/the-hard-job-of-interpreting-job#:~:text=The%20Puritan%20Joseph%20Caryl%2D%2D,period%20(1643%2D1666)).

In interpreting Psalms, it is imperative to know how Hebrew poetry functions and what type of psalm is being studied, since many of the psalms fit into the rubric of a specific genre. In interpreting poetry, it is foundational to understand the device of *parallelism*. Often lines will be in parallel to one another to reinforce an idea. When the lines in parallel express the same thought, it is called “synonymous parallelism.” Often the line in parallel provides more clarity and focus to the first line, so it is not merely a restatement, but an elucidating statement which adds nuance or shape to the first.¹⁶ When the lines in parallel express contrasting thoughts it is called “antithetical parallelism.”¹⁷ Another important element is that of “terseness,” which is a line that consists of only three or four Hebrew words, used for the profundity of brevity.¹⁸ The shortness of the line works as a form of emphasis. For example, in Psalm 1:4, the Psalmist says, “The wicked are not so.” In Hebrew the statement consists of three Hebrew words. In Psalm 1 the statement is used to emphasize the absolute contrast between the righteous and the wicked.

For the past hundred years, scholars have studied the “forms” of the Psalms to understand how it was used in Israel’s history and worship.¹⁹ Bruce Waltke argues persuasively for three forms of Psalms: petition, thanksgiving, and praise.²⁰ His argument is based on the biblical text of 1 Chronicles 16:4, in which David appoints the Levites “to make petition/invoke ... to give thanks ... and to praise the LORD.”²¹ This internal evidence on the division of the types of Psalms is clarifying

for their interpretation. Waltke argues that there is also progression in these forms. Petition leads to thankfulness; thankfulness leads to praise.²²

Proverbs

The structure and authorship of the Book of Proverbs proves vital for understanding how to preach through it. Proverbs 1–9 is an extended invitation to wisdom from Solomon to his son. It includes extolling the benefits of wisdom as well as warnings against adultery, folly, the adulterous woman, and wicked companions.²³ Proverbs 10:1–22:16 is filled with a general collection of Solomon’s proverbs, which at times stand alone and at other times form a flow of thought with other proverbs. Proverbs 22:17–24:22 constitute what is called “the thirty sayings of wisdom,” which essentially provide thirty summary statements for how to live out the fear of Yahweh. These are followed by “further sayings” of Solomon that run to the end of chapter 24. Proverbs 25–29 provide more proverbs of Solomon that are “more coherent collections of sayings.”²⁴ These are followed by proverbs from Agur (Prov 30) and King Lemuel (Prov 31). Understanding the complete form of the book of Proverbs is imperative for preaching it well, along with the poetic devices, which I discussed earlier in interpreting the Psalms.

It is of crucial importance to understand the book of Proverbs’ relationship to Jesus Christ. As I argued in the earlier portion of this article, Jesus is the embodiment of wisdom according to the New Testament apostles. Bruce Waltke and Christopher

¹⁶ Kidner remarks about synonymous parallelism, “In this form of parallelism the second line (or sometimes a second verse) simply reinforces the first, so that its content is enriched and the total effect becomes spacious and impressive.” Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 3.

¹⁷ David M. Howard Jr, “Psalms Notes,” in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 973–74.

¹⁸ Howard, 973.

¹⁹ See Waltke on the history of this development from the beginning of the twentieth century with Gunkel’s form criticism and his five categories for types of Psalms: (1) lament of individuals; (2) lament of community; (3) thanksgiving; (4) praise; and (5) royal. Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 875.

²⁰ Waltke, 875.

²¹ Waltke, 875.

²² Waltke, 875.

²³ See the general outline of Proverbs in the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*. Bruce K. Waltke and Christopher B. Ansberry, “Proverbs Notes,” in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 1193.

²⁴ Waltke and Ansberry, 1244.

Ansberry explain this relationship well:

The poetic description of Lady Wisdom in 8:22–31 contributes to an understanding of Jesus’ nature and identity. Similar to the way John 1:1–15 describes Jesus, Prov 8:22–29 affirms that Wisdom existed before the creation of any element within the cosmos. In Wisdom’s address to the simple in 1:20–33, she humbles herself, calls sinners to repentance, and serves as a mediator between the Lord and humanity in much the same way that Jesus humbled himself, called sinners to himself, and serves as the only Mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 9:11–28). As the truly wise king, one greater than Solomon, Jesus exemplifies God’s wisdom. But unlike Jesus Christ, Lady Wisdom is represented as being born ([Prov] 8:24), and so she is not eternal. She is also represented as an instrument of creation (3:18–19) and as present at the creation (8:30), but she is never represented as the Creator. The NT never identifies Lady Wisdom with Jesus Christ, who is the Creator (John 1:1–5; Col 1:15–20). Rather the NT uses wisdom as a theological category to describe Jesus’ identity, deity, and redemptive work.²⁵

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes presents what life is like outside of a relationship with God. In the words of the Preacher, “everything is meaningless.” Death levels everything. Sinclair Ferguson writes, “The Pundit was no doubt a brilliant man; but he is not speaking here as a genius, only as a simple realist who has faced up to the ultimate truth about ‘life under the sun’.” It ends. Without

God, this is all there is. We must make the best we can of it.”²⁶ Similarly, Michael Eaton writes, “Ecclesiastes is thus an exploration of the barrenness of life without a practical faith in God.”²⁷ For Eaton, the purpose of the book is that of a negative apologetic. It shows the futility of a world without the knowledge of God.

The interpretive challenge of Ecclesiastes is how to deal with what Eaton calls the “enigma of Ecclesiastes.” He writes:

The major interpretive problem of Ecclesiastes is to understand its apparent internal contradictions and vicissitudes of thought. At times the Preacher seems to be gloomy, pessimistic, a skeleton at the feast; everything comes under his lashing scorn: laughter, drink, possessions, sex, work, wisdom, riches, honour, children, even righteousness. Yet, at other points he urges that we should enjoy life, that there is nothing better than to eat well, enjoy our labour, receive with gladness the riches God give us but be content if he gives none.²⁸

This tension, though, is actually quite easily reconciled. God’s gifts, apart from a recognition of the God who gives them, leads to a lack of meaning and ultimate enjoyment for human beings. It is only in recognizing God’s hand at work which enables us to enjoy his gifts (Eccl 2:24). We must behold work, sex, family, righteousness, laughter, and all the good things in life as “God’s gift to man” (Eccl 3:13). Ultimately, the final verses provide the clarity we need: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:13–14).

²⁵ Waltke and Ansberry, 1192–93.

²⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Pundit’s Folly* (Edinburgh, UK; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1995), 41.

²⁷ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 45.

²⁸ Eaton, 36.

Song of Solomon

There have been a number of hermeneutical arguments about the interpretation of Song of Solomon.²⁹ Early Jewish interpreters believed it to be an allegory of God's relationship to Israel, while many Christian interpreters have believed it to be an allegory between Christ and the church (see, for example, George Burrowes's commentary on the Song of Solomon).³⁰ The graphic nature of the book proves difficult for interpreting it as an allegory, though, because there are some details that defy or even contradict Christ's relationship to the church.³¹ Though certainly marriage is a general picture of the Lord's relationship to Israel (cf. Jer 3; Hos 1–3) and Christ's relationship to the church (Eph 5:22–33), every verse of Song of Solomon should not be constrained into this grid.

The better interpretation of Song of Solomon is to understand the book as a beautiful picture of marital covenant faithfulness. Only after seeing this application and understanding the picture of marriage that Solomon is making can we make some general comments about Christ's relationship to the church. In other words, the plain and immediate interpretation involves a human marital relationship, not God's relationship to us. But there could be valid deductions and implications made regarding the believer's relationship to Christ and the body of Christ's relationship to its bridegroom as extrapolations from the primary reading.

CONCLUSION

The poetic books are challenging because of their form, complexity, and many of the looming hermeneutical difficulties discussed above. Nevertheless, they are most needed for today's

Christian. Preaching the poetic books will give God's people a full biblical worldview, which will help fill in gaps for everyday Christian living. Furthermore, this section of Scripture teaches us how to approach, worship, praise, and live for Yahweh in a world surrounded by skeptics and enemies. The poetic books are an integral part of the whole counsel of God, and the church desperately needs their message in the moral, relational, and spiritual confusion of our day. •

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²⁹ Richard Hess, "Song of Songs Notes," in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 1282.

³⁰ George Burrowes, *The Song of Solomon*, Geneva Series of Commentaries (Edinburgh, UK; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958).

³¹ Richard Hess writes on this point, "The absence of any indication of allegory or identification of these symbols and the problematic nature of consistent application argues against this approach. For example, the woman rouses the man ([Song] 8:5); in what way does the church rouse Christ?" Hess, "Song of Solomon Notes," 1282.

Preaching the Prophets: Zephaniah as a Case Study for Christian Proclamation

by Jason S. DeRouchie

INTRODUCTION

Peter stressed that “*all the prophets*” foretold Christ’s tribulation and proclaimed the days of the church (Acts 3:18, 24).¹ Indeed, these mouthpieces of the heavenly court “searched and inquired carefully” concerning the gracious salvation you and I enjoy (1 Pet 1:10). Their object of inquiry was not restricted to dreams and visions, for Zephaniah was reading Isaiah’s writings, and Jeremiah was interpreting Deuteronomy. And as the Holy Spirit of Christ guided the prophet’s interpretations (2 Pet 1:20–21; cf. 1 Cor 2:13–14) and “predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories,” they proclaimed truths of Christ’s person and the time of his coming (1 Pet 1:11). Thus, Paul could faithfully declare that “the gospel of God ... concerning his Son” was “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:1–3). And as they proclaimed, they knew that they were writing principally *not* for their own age but for future generations, for “it was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you” (1 Pet 1:12; cf. Deut 30:8; Isa 29:18; 30:8; Jer 30:2–3, 24; Dan 12:9–10).²

The Old Testament (OT) Prophets are Christian Scripture, yet Christians often struggle to understand them. How should one interpret the OT Prophets for Christian proclamation? This article addresses this question; however, it assumes that the interpreter is already born again, having the eyes of his heart enlightened and having turned from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18; Eph 1:18). Only spiritual people can rightly read a spiritual book (1 Cor 2:13–14), and only those with eternal life can hear and believe (John 5:24). We can only hear and understand the Prophets rightly when we read them *through Christ*.

God is the author of all Scripture (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21), “declaring the end from the beginning” (Isa 46:10). As such, faithful interpretation of the OT Prophets requires that the expositor consider three overlapping contexts:³

1. *The Close Context*: Assess your passage’s immediate historical and literary setting within the biblical book. *What, how, and why* does

¹ All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² For more on these thoughts and the reality that the Old Testament is (and has always been) *Christian* Scripture, see Jason S. DeRouchie, *Delighting in the Old Testament: Through Christ and for Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 15–70.

³ The titles come from Trent Hunter and Stephen J. Wellum, *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 42–69.

the text communicate? Carefully consider the passage's words, thought flow, and theology.

2. *The Continuing Context:* Account for informing theology from earlier known Scripture and the place of the passage within God's story of salvation. How does your passage draw on earlier texts and contribute to God's unfolding drama, whether by progressing the covenants or developing a biblical theme or typological pattern that culminates in Christ?
3. *The Complete Context:* Determine how your passage fits within the whole biblical canon. How does later Scripture utilize or fulfill your passage or clarify or develop the meaning of your passage? Finalize your reflections on how your passage contributes to the progress of revelation and points to or clarifies Christ's person and work?

The interpreter's task is incomplete until he has assessed all three biblical contexts.⁴ This essay will use the book of Zephaniah to overview and illustrate the interpretive task.⁵ Evaluating the *close context*, we will consider (1) the book's historical context, (2) the boundaries and nature of a given prophetic speech act, and (3) the function of this speech act within the book's literary flow. Reflecting on the *continuing contexts*, we will study (4) how our passage contributes to God's covenantal progress and purposes and (5) the prophet's use of Scripture. Finally, weighing the *complete context*, we will reflect on (6) the significance of the book's location within the

canon, (7) Scripture's use of the prophetic book, and (8) how the prophet spoke of Christ.

THE CLOSE CONTEXT: THE PASSAGE'S IMMEDIATE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING

1. Know That the Prophets Operated within History

The Bible portrays the OT prophets as ambassadors of the heavenly court (2 Kgs 17:13; Jer 23:21–22), whom God commissioned to preach for him to the people and to pray for the people to him. Every OT prophet was a man of his time, engaging distinct problems, perspectives, powers, and practices. Keeping in mind the major historical moments prior to and during the time of the prophets will aid interpretation.

All fifteen OT classical prophets preached during a monumental 340-year period (770–433 BC) during which Israel and Judah were reduced from independent nations to a single, pitiful, remnant state (Judah), one tiny district in the huge Persian empire. This era was one of dramatic change. God's prophets clarified for Israel and the world why history was playing out the way it was and how this history fit within God's overall kingdom-building plan culminating in Christ.

Were God's ancient promises of Israel's greatness void? Was there any hope for the promised future kingdom? Would the era of curse be supplanted by restoration blessing? Prophetic preaching is significantly about historical developments, and no

⁴ For a more thorough overview of the process of biblical interpretation in general, see Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017).

⁵ For a more developed discussion of Zephaniah's message, see Jason S. DeRouchie, "Zephaniah," in *Daniel–Malachi*, vol. 7 of *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 561–604; Jason S. DeRouchie, "Zephaniah," *TGC Bible Commentary* (2021), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/zephaniah/>; cf. Jason S. DeRouchie, *Zephaniah*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament 32 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

interpretation of its message that ignores historical context can be accurate. The figure below overviews the main world powers and the three main periods during which the classical prophets preached.

POWER & PROPHETIC PERIOD	ISRAEL	JUDAH	HEBREW CANON ORDER
Assyria (870–626 BC) <i>8th–early 7th century</i>	Jonah (ca. 770) Amos (ca. 760) Hosea (ca. 760–730)	Isaiah (ca. 740–700) Micah (ca. 737–690) Nahum (ca. 650)	Jeremiah Ezekiel Isaiah The Twelve Hosea Joel
Babylon (626–539 BC) <i>Late 7th–early 6th century</i>		Habakkuk (ca. 630) Jeremiah (ca. 627–580) Zephaniah (ca. 622) Joel (ca. 600?) Obadiah (ca. 586?) Ezekiel (ca. 593–570) <i>[in Babylon]</i>	Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah
Persia (539–323 BC) <i>Late 6th–5th century</i>		Haggai (ca. 520) Zechariah (ca. 520–518) Malachi (ca. 433)	Haggai Zechariah Malachi

FIGURE 1. THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE CLASSICAL WRITING PROPHETS⁶

Concerning Zephaniah’s message, the book bearing his name informs us that he prophesied during the days of King Josiah (Zeph 1:1). This reference encourages the reader to interpret Zephaniah against the backdrop of the Assyrian crisis, the rising Babylonian crisis, and those portions of Scripture about Josiah’s reign and reforms (640–609 BC; i.e., 2 Kgs 22:1–23:30). Because Zephaniah seems very aware of Deuteronomy yet still has to confront so much sin, he likely ministered in late 622 BC, after “the book of the Law” was found but before Josiah’s reforms had significant impact on Jerusalem (cf. Deut 31:9–11, 26–27; 2 Kgs 22:8, 11; 23:2–3).⁷

2. Know the Boundaries and Nature of the Prophetic Speech

When choosing a passage to exegete, think in terms of oracles. Nearly all prophetic teaching is in the form of oracles, self-contained verbal revelations from God, often beginning, “Thus says the LORD.” The prophets appear to have spoken or sung the oracles publicly to call people to loyalty or to explain what God was doing in history and why. We also must carefully identify the beginning and end of an oracle and understand its characteristic terminology, structure, and speech types. Figure 2 overviews the four most common prophetic speech types.

⁶ The Hebrew arrangement comes from *Baba Bathra* 14b, which appears in the Jewish Talmud but dates back to the time of Christ. Most of the dates for the prophets come from John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 52.

⁷ Cf. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 254–55.

INDICTMENT	Statement of the offense, noting the specific covenant stipulations violated
INSTRUCTION	Clarification of the expected response, calling listeners to heed the covenant stipulations
WARNING/PUNISHMENT	Declaration of the punishment to be carried out in relation to the covenant curses
RESTORATION/SALVATION	Affirmation of future hope or deliverance in relation to the covenant restoration blessings

FIGURE 2. THE FOUR MOST COMMON TYPES OF PROPHETIC SPEECH

The book of Zephaniah is framed by “the word of the LORD” (Zeph 1:1) and “the LORD has said” (author’s translation) and is dotted with the phrase the “utterance of the LORD” (= “declares the LORD,” ESV, 1:2, 3, 10; 2:9; 3:8). Thus, the whole bears divine authority, with God as the source of it all. Although the book portrays Yahweh in both first person (“I,” “my,” “me”) and third person (“Yahweh/LORD,” “he,” “his,” “him”), there are no introductory speech frames (e.g., “Thus says the LORD”), so the whole comes to us as a single oracle from the great King (3:15), regardless of whether we are reading Yahweh’s voice or his prophet’s.

Recalling similar masculine plural imperatives in 2:1, 3 (“Gather!” ... “Seek!”), 3:8–20 begins with a command for God’s faithful people to “wait” for him to bring justice (3:8a). Then two statements each beginning with “for” provide reasons why God’s faithful people should wait for him to act: (1) Yahweh will judge the earth’s people groups (“nations”) and political powers (“kingdoms”) on the day of the Lord (3:8b), and (2) God will raise up a transformed international humanity who calls on his name and who is represented by Cushites, ancient black Africa and part of Zephaniah’s ancestry (3:9–10; cf. Zeph 1:1).⁸ Zephaniah then clarifies this coming day of Yahweh with two subsections that each begin with “on that day” (Zeph 3:11–13, 16–20). Between these two clarifications

are discursive commands for the new multiethnic and faithful Jerusalem to rejoice (3:14–15). Faith in God’s future work (3:8–10, 11–13, 16–20) should produce praise in the present (3:14–15).

Zephaniah 3:8–20 is a prophetic charge to the remnant that uses promises of restoration/salvation to motivate action. Supporting this interpretation are Yahweh coming to “save” his people (3:17, 19) and his people rejoicing (3:14–15).

3. Know the Function of the Prophetic Speech within the Flow of the Book

Each book consists of sentences, paragraphs, sections, and larger units that work together to communicate a message. Thus, interpreting a passage or oracle within its close context requires not only understanding the passage’s meaning within the constraints of the surrounding texts but also within the flow and overarching message of the book. The interpreter must routinely go back and forth between considering each speech act’s specific details and how the messages of various parts or greater thought units relate together. The question to ask is, “What would this book’s message be lacking if my passage was missing?” If an interpreter does not understand how a given passage among the Prophets (or any genre or

⁸ For more on Zephaniah’s bi-racial heritage, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Addressees in Zephaniah 2:1, 3: Who Should Seek YHWH Together?,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 30.2 (2020): 203–05.

canonical division) contributes to the book's overarching message, he has not understood that oracle's literary function and intended message as deeply as he ought.

Growing out of the imperatives in 2:1, 3 and 3:8 and the motivations that surround them, the main idea of Zephaniah is: *Seek the Lord together to avoid punishment, and wait for the Lord to enjoy salvation.* Figure 3 shows my message-driven outline for the book.

- I. The Preamble to the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction (1:1)
- II. The Setting of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction: A Call to Revere God in View of His Coming Day (1:2–18)
 - A. The Context for the Call to Revere God: Coming Punishment (1:2–6)
 - B. The Content of the Call to Revere God (1:7–18)
- III. The Substance of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction (2:1–3:20)
 - A. Stage 1: The Appeal to Seek the Lord Together to Avoid Punishment (2:1–3:7)
 - B. Stage 2: The Appeal to Wait for the Lord to Enjoy Salvation (3:8–20b)
- IV. The Closing of the Savior's Invitation to Satisfaction (3:20c)

FIGURE 3. A MESSAGE-DRIVEN OUTLINE OF ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah 3:8–20b is the book's final speech unit. The section begins with "therefore," signaling that it builds on the preceding material. Specifically, *because* of God's coming judgments of "woe" against the nations (2:5–15) and Jerusalem (3:1–7), God's people should "wait" for Yahweh to act (3:8). Such reasoning only makes sense if, in Zephaniah's reckoning, God's historical judgments against various sinful kingdoms function as proof that God will eventually judge every evil kingdom. Though Zephaniah is known for his declarations of judgment, he understood his material to be ultimately about salvation. He writes mostly for the remnant in Judah and surrounding lands, urging them to pursue God with patience. He motivates them to do this by graphically depicting dreadful judgment and satisfying salvation. Yahweh's faithful followers must seek God together and wait for him so they can ultimately delight in their deliverance and Deliverer.

THE CONTINUING CONTEXTS: THE PASSAGE'S INFORMING THEOLOGY AND PLACE IN SALVATION HISTORY

4. Know That the Prophets Thought Covenantally and Redemptive-Historically

As the OT prophets operated within history, they did so as covenant enforcers. God established and promised covenants with humanity that shape the prophets' worldview and understanding of what God is doing in space and time. A covenant is a formal (as opposed to biological) relationship between two parties that is based on mutual promises, usually with God as witness. We must consider the biblical covenants if we are to situate the prophets' declarations of judgment and hope within God's overarching

purposes. These five main historical covenants make up Scripture’s storyline:⁹

- Adamic-Noahic (Isa 24:4–6; Jer 33:20–21, 25; Hos 6:7);
- Abrahamic (Isa 41:8–10; 51:2; 54:1–3; Jer 33:25–26; Mic 7:20);
- Mosaic (Isa 5:24; 42:24; Jer 2:8; 6:19; 8:8; 9:12–14; Ezek 7:26; 22:26; Hos 4:6; 8:1; Amos 2:4; Hab 1:3–4; Zeph 3:4; Zech 7:12; Mal 4:4[3:22]);
- Davidic (Isa 9:7; 16:5; 22:22; 55:3; Jer 23:5; 30:9; 33:15, 17, 20–22, 25–26; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25; Hos 3:5; Amos 9:11; Zech 12:10; 13:1);
- New/everlasting (Isa 55:3; 54:10; 55:3; Jer 31:31, 33; 32:40; 50:5; Ezek 16:60, 62; 34:25; 37:26; Hos 2:18; Zech 9:11; Mal 3:1; cf. Dan 9:27).

The Mosaic covenant (Exod 19–Deut 33) bore the greatest influence on the preaching of the classical prophets. It guided their indictments and instructions toward Israel and supplied a framework for the blessings, curses, and restoration blessings they pronounced (see Lev 26; Deut 4, 27–32).¹⁰ As a result of covenant-breaking, Yahweh divided the monarchy and brought the curse of foreign oppression and exile, first against the northern kingdom of Israel in 723 BC and then against the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC.

The prophets spoke often of these judgments against Israel and Judah, but they knew that Yahweh’s final word was not a curse, for his mercy would triumph (Deut 4:30–31). The era of

restoration blessing is the new creational age of the new covenant inaugurated in Christ’s first coming. During this time, Yahweh would fulfill his vow to give an eternal kingdom and throne to David’s son (2 Sam 7:12–16; cf. Deut 17:18–20). This son would keep the Mosaic covenant’s requirements, usher in the time of restoration, and be the promised seed of the woman and of Abraham through whom all the world would be blessed (Gen 3:15; 22:17b–18; Deut 17:18–20). The prophets regularly build on these promises, fusing the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants’ hopes into one (e.g., Isa 9:7; 55:3; Jer 23:5; 30:9; Ezek 34:23; 37:24–25; Hos 3:5; Amos 9:11; Zech 13:1).

Being an enforcer of the Mosaic covenant, Zephaniah routinely rebukes Jerusalem for its sins. These sins are numerous and include worshiping false gods and the stars (Zeph 1:4–5; cf. Exod 20:3; Deut 4:19) and various forms of covenant disloyalty (Zeph 1:6, 9, 12; 2:2–4). For such sins, God fulfills his covenantal promise of judgment by sending Babylon to destroy Judah in 586 BC (Zeph 1:4–6, 12–13; 3:1–7). Yet this immediate punishment only foreshadowed a greater “day of the LORD” coming on the whole world “because they have sinned against the LORD” (1:17). Standing as Lord of all creation through the Adamic-Noahic covenant (cf. Gen 9:9–11; Isa 24:4–6), Yahweh would punish all rebels of humanity (Zeph 1:2–3, 14–18; 3:8), including those in Judah.¹¹ However, his ingathering for judgment would be matched by his salvation of an international remnant of worshipers (3:9–10; cf. 2:7, 9), as the blessing of God would reach the nations, fulfilling his covenant promises to Abraham (cf. Gen 12:3; 22:18; 26:4).¹²

⁹ See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); Jason S. DeRouchie, “An Arc of the Covenants: Tracing How the Bible’s Storyline Climaxes in Christ,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 26.1 (2022): 10–45.

¹⁰ For a full list of these blessings, curses, and restoration blessings, see DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament*, 48–49.

¹¹ For a synthesis of the prophet’s portrayal of the day of the Lord as cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “Revering God: Punishment on the Day of the Lord (Zeph 1:2–18),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 181.1 (2024): forthcoming.

¹² For a synthesis of the prophet’s portrayal of the day of the Lord as renewal, with additional focus on satisfying salvation as the motivation for endurance, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “Seeking God and Waiting: Hope on the Day of the Lord (Zeph 2:1–4; 3:8–10),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 181.2 (2024): forthcoming; Jason S. DeRouchie, “Rejoicing Then and Now: Pleasures on the Day of the Lord (Zeph 3:11–20),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 181.3 (2024): forthcoming.

5. Know How the Prophet Uses Scripture

The prophets often referred to prior Scriptures within their oracles, unpacking their Spirit-led interpretations (1 Pet 1:10–11; 2 Pet 1:20–21). Rightly noting the function of these citations will dramatically deepen your understanding of prophetic speech. Often, the prophets only make subtle allusions, and a prophet rarely explicitly states when he is citing a text. In such instances, the interpreter must account not only for the text cited but also for its context, for the biblical author was aware of both. For this reason, one must seek to understand how cited text functions within its book so that the purpose of the citation becomes clearer.

Zephaniah 3:9–10 reads: “For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering.” As noted, 3:9–10 reveals one reason why the remnant from Judah and beyond should “wait” for Yahweh and not give up (3:8a). They must patiently trust God *for* he is committed to create on the day of the Lord a transformed, international worshipping community of “peoples” (3:9–10).

Zephaniah appears to be intentionally portraying the reversal of the Tower of Babel punishment when Yahweh scattered seventy nations (Gen 11:1–9; cf. 10:32), for there are at least eight common terms between the passages: “people(s),” “language/speech,” “call,” “all,” “name,” “Yahweh,” “one,” and “disperse.” Furthermore, only these OT texts conjoin “language/speech” (Gen 11:1, 7, 9; Zeph 3:9) and “dispersed” (Gen 11:9; Zeph 3:10). With this, Cush was ancient black Africa, which derived its name from Noah’s grandson “Cush,” who fathered Nimrod, the builder of Babel(on)

(Gen 10:6, 10). Thus, Zephaniah 3:9–10 envisions descendants of the very instigators of the Babel rebellion as representing the restoration and reconciliation with God at the end of the age, thus fulfilling God’s promises to Abraham (Gen 12:3; 22:18; cf. 18:18; 26:4; 28:14). Zephaniah probably chose “Cush” as the sole example of Yahweh’s international transformation because he himself bore Cushite heritage (Zeph 1:1).

THE COMPLETE CONTEXT: THE PASSAGE’S PLACE AND FUNCTION WITHIN THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE

6. Know the Function of Your Prophetic Book Within the Canon

The Major and Minor Prophets constitute the Latter Prophets in the ancient Jewish canon.¹³ These Latter Prophets follow Joshua–Kings, which the ancient Jews called the Former Prophets. This structure allows Joshua–Kings to tell us *what* happened in covenant history and prophets like Isaiah, Habakkuk, and Malachi to describe *why* it happened. This is yet another evidence supporting the claim that Yahweh’s prophets are (Mosaic) covenant enforcers.

We must also consider why the arrangement of the Latter Prophets in Scripture appears substantially driven by theological rather than chronological purposes. For example, even though Jonah is likely the earliest of the first millennial writing prophets (ca. 770 BC), he is placed fifth in the Minor Prophets, which the ancient Jews regarded as a unified book and called the Book of the Twelve. For this reason, someone like Stephen can quote Amos 5:25 and say this citation comes from “the book of the prophets” (Acts 7:42). We should ask, therefore, whether Obadiah’s preceding Jonah is to influence our reading of Jonah.¹⁴

¹³ The distinction between *major* and *minor* relates to book size, not significance.

¹⁴ For a commentary that accounts for the theological interrelationship of the Minor Prophets, see Michael B. Shepherd, *A Commentary on the Book of the Twelve: The Minor Prophets*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018).

Zephaniah is the ninth volume in the Book of the Twelve. The individual books of the prophets generally move from sin to punishment to restoration, and the Book of the Twelve as a whole also follows this pattern, focusing on Israel's sin (Hosea–Micah), punishment (Nahum–Zephaniah), and restoration (Haggai–Malachi). In this understanding, Zephaniah supplies the all-important bridge between the punishment and restoration sections, with Zephaniah 1:2–3:7 focusing on punishment and Zephaniah 3:8–20 focusing on restoration. Thus, Zephaniah provides “a bridge between the sin, punishment, and restoration sections of the Twelve.... It embodies both the climax and the falling action of the Twelve’s story line. Put another way, it completes the bottom of the U-shape and begins the journey upwards” into hope.¹⁵

7. Know How Scripture Uses the Prophetic Book

When discussing the continuing context, we noted how Zephaniah 3:9–10 recalls the tragedy of the Tower of Babel and portrays God’s eschatological new creation as a reversal of that judgment. Luke saw Pentecost as marking this reversal of the Babel punishment, and he appears to have drawn on Zephaniah 3:8–13 when shaping his narrative of the early church’s rise. I’ll highlight only the most important connections with 3:9–10.

1. Peter cites Joel 2:28–32 in Acts 2:17–21, but the key term “language/speech/tongue” (Acts 2:3–4, 11, 26, always plural) is lacking in Joel. However, it is present in the Greek text of both Genesis 11:7 and Zephaniah 3:9. Furthermore, Luke’s citation in Acts 2:21 of Joel 2:32 that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” closely resembles God’s promise in Zephaniah 3:9 that he would purify the remnant’s speech “that all of them may call upon the name of

the LORD,” which reverses the self-exalting quest of those in Babel (Gen 11:4).

2. Zephaniah’s depiction of the international community serving the Lord in unity (Zeph 3:9) may have moved Luke to highlight the early saints’ common surrender and worship (Acts 2:42).
3. Luke stresses how devout Jews and Gentile proselytes “from every nation under heaven” were gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 2:5), but strikingly absent from the list of peoples and nations in Acts 2:9–11 is the designation “Ethiopians,” the Greek title for the OT “Cushites.” Most likely, the absence here was to highlight the direct fulfillment of Zephaniah 3:10 in the story of God’s saving the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), the first known Gentile convert to Christianity.

Hence, Luke viewed Christ’s death and resurrection to be initiating the day of the Lord as both punishment and renewal. Pentecost and the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles, beginning with the salvation of the Ethiopian politician, marked the initial fulfillment of Zephaniah’s vision of new creation on the day of the Lord.¹⁶

8. Know That the Prophet Spoke of Christ

The previous section opened the door for seeing how Zephaniah, as an OT prophet, indeed promises the gospel (Rom 1:1–3) and anticipates the coming of Christ and the age of the church (Luke 24:45–47; Acts 3:18, 24). Jesus climaxes all redemptive history (Mark 1:15), provides the focus of many OT prophecies (Matt 11:13 with Luke 16:16; Acts 3:18, 24), stands as the end/goal of the old covenant law (Rom 10:4), and makes possible all OT promises (2 Cor 1:20). Through his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus underwent the day of the Lord

¹⁵ Paul R. House, *The Unity of the Twelve*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 97 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 151.

¹⁶ For more on Zephaniah’s use of Scripture and Scripture’s use of Zephaniah, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “Zephaniah, Book Of,” *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 886–90.

judgment on behalf of all the elect (see Zeph 1:7). He died “not for the [Jewish] nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:52). As we engage Yahweh’s prophets, we must always assess how they spoke of Christ and how their declarations relate to his work. Only then can we say with Paul, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Every conclusion requires textual warrant.

The way Jesus fulfills the OT is not uniform (Matt 5:17–18; Luke 24:44), so considering how to magnify him in the OT requires querying the text from a multi-faceted perspective. Figure 4 notes seven ways we can see and celebrate Christ in the OT.¹⁷

1. Consider the OT’s salvation-historical trajectories.
2. See the OT’s direct messianic predictions.
3. Recognize similarities and contrasts within salvation history.
4. Identify OT types.
5. Revel in Yahweh’s identity and activity.
6. Note the OT’s ethical ideals.
7. Use the OT to instruct others.

FIGURE 4. SEVEN WAYS TO SEE AND CELEBRATE CHRIST IN THE OT

In addition, G. K. Beale has identified five principles that are rooted in the OT’s own story of salvation history and that guided the New Testament (NT) authors’ OT interpretive conclusions.¹⁸

1. The NT authors always assume *corporate solidarity*, in which one can represent the many (e.g., Rom 5:18–19).
2. Christ *represents the true (remnant) Israel of the old covenant and the true (consummate) Israel, the church*, of the new covenant (Isa 49:3, 6 with Luke 2:32 and Acts 26:23; Gal 3:16, 29).
3. God’s wise and sovereign plan *unites salvation history* in such a way that earlier parts correspond to later parts (Isa 46:9–10; Acts 20:27; 1 Cor 10:11; Eph 1:11; Col 2:17; Rev 22:13).
4. Christ has initiated (though not consummated) *the age of end-times fulfillment* (Mark 1:15; Luke 16:16; Acts 2:17; 1 Cor 10:11; Gal 4:4; Heb 1:2; 9:26; 1 John 2:18).
5. Christ and his glory stand as the end-time center and goal of history such that his life, death, and resurrection provide *the key to interpreting earlier portions of the OT and its promises* (Rom 16:25–26; 1 Cor 2:2; 2 Cor 3:14).

¹⁷ For an overview of these seven ways the OT testifies to Jesus, see DeRouchie, *Delighting in the Old Testament*, 75–107.

¹⁸ G. K. Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?,” *Themelios* 14.3 (1989): 90; G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 52–53, 95–102. I have added all scriptural references.

All these conclusions derive from reading the OT within its complete context.

We will now consider Zephaniah 3:14–15, which verses mark the rhetorical motivational high-point of the book. “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil” (3:14–15). The prophet calls the remnant people to rejoice as if their deliverance has already begun (3:14), and they are to do so because God has removed the curse of enemy oppression. Sovereign Yahweh is with them, so they need not fear (3:15).

Significantly, John saw here anticipations of Christ’s coming. In John 12:13–16 the apostle narrates Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The crowds cry out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” And then John notes how Jesus is fulfilling what is written, “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” Most study Bibles rightly note that the throng quotes Psalm 118:25–26 and that John cites Zechariah 9:9. However, the passage in the Psalms doesn’t mention “the King of Israel,” and Zechariah 9:9 actually opens, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion.” The only place in the OT that brings together “the King of Israel,” “daughter of Zion,” and “fear not” is Zephaniah 3:14–15, and this suggests that John is also alluding to this text and sees Jesus fulfilling the end-time reign of God that Zephaniah anticipates would be realized at the day of the Lord.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Faithful OT preaching requires careful, Spirit-dependent OT interpretation that examines a passage’s close, continuing, and complete contexts. The OT was Jesus’s only Bible, and it is Christian

Scripture that was written for our instruction (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). It contains the earliest promises of the gospel of God concerning his Son (Rom 1:1–3), for in it the prophets interpret earlier revelation to discern the person of Christ and the time of his coming (1 Pet 1:10–11; 2 Pet 1:20–21). These very Scriptures bear witness to Jesus (John 1:45; 5:39), foretelling his sufferings and the days of the church (Acts 3:18, 24). Christian leaders must preach and teach from the Major and Minor Prophets for the good of the saints (2 Tim 3:16–17; 4:2), for their own welfare (Acts 20:26–27), and for the sake of Christ’s name among all the nations (Rom 1:5). I urge every preacher of the Word: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). •

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¹⁹ For a development of this case, see Christopher S. Tachick, “King of Israel” and “Do Not Fear, Daughter of Zion”: *The Use of Zephaniah 3 in John 12*, Reformed Academic Dissertations 11 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

Preaching the New Testament Narrative Books

by Maya Kuthyola & Jeff Moore

INTRODUCTION

People love stories. As an African raised in a time in which TV was uncommon, much less smartphones or gaming consoles, one of the things I (Maya) most enjoyed and found entertaining was sitting beside my grandmother and listening to enthralling tales of her life experiences. This activity was not only carried out in my home, but it was a pastime in many African homes. Stories are captivating, especially the ones that are not only entertaining but have moral lessons that inform listeners about how they ought to live. Stories are instructive, and they relate to daily life and human experiences. When told well, stories are easy to understand, and a sharp listener can retell them almost word for word because of the natural flow that they possess.

It is not surprising, then, that the Bible, which is God's Word, is filled with stories. These stories are found both in the Old and New Testaments. The official literary terminology that is used in place of the word "story" is *narrative*, which word will be used throughout this article. Specifically, this article will provide principles for preaching New Testament narratives in order to help the pastor who is on the front lines of ministry learn how to navigate the process of preaching from these books. At first glance, narratives may appear easy to preach, but they are often avoided by preachers because of the interpretive and theological challenges they present.

The New Testament narrative books are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. While it would be of great benefit to do a thorough overview of each one of these books, this article does not allow space to accomplish that task. For that reason, first, we will look at the steps that should be considered when preaching New Testament narratives. Then, we will focus on John 3:1–21 as a test case for these steps, with a special emphasis on John 3:16. My hope and prayer is that, by the time you reach the end of this article, whether you are a beginner or you have been in ministry for many years, you will have tools and insights that will prove to be valuable as you approach narrative preaching.

FIVE STEPS TO CONSIDER WHEN PREACHING NEW TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

There are five steps to consider when assessing narratives in the New Testament: (1) observing section breaks, (2) analyzing context, (3) respecting authorial intent, (4) preaching narrative *as narrative*, and (5) applying the text. Each step will be unpacked in the ensuing discussion.

1. Observing Section Breaks

Preparing for a sermon is hard work. If the preacher avoids spending quality time observing the details of the text, he is setting himself up to fail in delivering a clear message from the Word of God. One of the most important details that the preacher must pay attention to when

preaching from New Testament narratives is observing section breaks. Each story in Scripture occurs in a distinct section or unit of thought (pericope) crafted by the author. Simply put, every effective story has a beginning and ending. Biblical narratives are no different. When the preacher takes up his Bible to preach a scriptural story, one of his tasks is to know where the story begins and also where it ends.¹ Since most biblical narratives can be broken down into a series of scenes, it is helpful to use those scenes to subdivide the story into digestible parts.

Recognizing section breaks helps the expositor to preach the narrative within its scope without leaving the congregation hanging or giving them unnecessary information. Yet this reality is one of the real challenges of preaching this genre. Capturing the whole story in a narrative sometimes entails covering a large number of verses in a single sermon! Jesus's encounter with the woman from Samaria starts with important background information in John 4:1 and does not conclude until 4:42. The full episode is lengthy. When was the last time most preachers expounded a forty-two-verse text of Scripture? This issue is one of the reasons why many preachers avoid the biblical narratives. The New Testament narratives, however, are part of "the whole counsel of God" that we are to proclaim (Acts 20:27).² If we want to be faithful preachers of God's Word, we should aim at preaching the fullness of the Scriptures, and this task does not exclude the narratives.

2. Analyzing Context

Context is crucial and essential for the preacher to analyze when dealing with any passage of Scripture. For that reason, it is fitting that one understands any given narrative in the context of its book, its epoch in salvation history, and the entire Bible. Understanding a narrative in context is the key to identifying the significance and main point of the story. If the preacher fails to provide the context of the narrative passage, he will hinder his audience's understanding of important background details of the setting (i.e., time, place, characters, cultural dynamics, and key events that preceded it). Just as it is unnatural for someone to start a story halfway through its cycle of events, a biblical narrative only can be appreciated fully when the setting is presented from its beginning to its resolution.

We must remember that when we approach biblical narratives, we are dealing with a qualitatively different book—it is first and foremost God's Word, its contents are God-breathed (2 Tim 3:17; Greek: *theopneustos*), and it must be treated as such. Nevertheless, God chose to use the human medium of storytelling that is similar to non-inspired human communication. That is to say, God does not speak to us in a distant heavenly tongue!³ The Spirit gave impulse to *real* human beings who conveyed knowledge of divine matters through *real* human channels of expression (2 Pet 1:20–21). Thus, the preacher must take it upon himself to be faithful to explain the background of the text. He

¹ For guidelines on determining the boundaries of a section or pericope in the Gospels and Acts, see the sample test-case of Mark 15:33–41 in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011), 407–11, esp. 408–09.

² All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

³ B. B. Warfield notes, "... the whole of Scripture in all its parts and in all its elements, down to the least minutiae, in form of expression as well as in substance of teaching, is from God; but the whole of it has been given by God through the instrumentality of man." Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1948), 150.

must discuss who wrote the book, what the historical or cultural setting was at that time, who are the chief characters in the story, and how that context is different from that of the current audience.

If the work of dealing with context is not done properly, there are potentially massive implications, and often disastrous ones, for the church. Rather than pulling meaning *out of* the text (exegesis), hearers will be tempted to impose their own assumptions and preconceptions *into* the text (eisegesis). The job of preaching is to unfold the thoughts of God from the text rather than to insert the wisdom of man into the text. Thus, faithful handling of Scripture involves painstaking attention to “context, context, context.”

3. Respecting Authorial Intent

Tales told in the African context are entertaining and often contain moral lessons for the listener. The New Testament narratives, however, contain much more than moral lessons. The New Testament authors, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, included specific stories with intention and purpose in each of their books. This literary element is what scholars call “authorial intent.”⁴ The *author* of the text, not the reader, determines the meaning of what is conveyed. As Köstenberger and Patterson state, “There is no excuse for interpretive arrogance that elevates the reader above text and author.”⁵

Authorial intent is seen in the varied perspectives of the biblical writers in the narratives found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and in their different emphases therein. The detail-oriented Matthew shows the reader that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, while Mark focuses on Jesus as the servant—he came to earth to suffer and

die, paying the penalty of our sins—but through the resurrection, he achieves victory over Satan, sin, and death. Meanwhile, Luke emphasizes Jesus being true man so that the gospel can permeate to humanity in their fallen condition of poverty, sickness, and most of all, sin. Finally, the non-Synoptic Gospel writer, John, focuses on Jesus as true God as he emphasizes the theological significance of the one who came down from heaven to perform various “signs” as a witness to the Father. These distinctive features in the Gospel narratives reflect the authors’ varying emphases and intentions in writing.

Many Bible readers fail in their interpretation of narratives because they lose sight of authorial intent in each section. It is the task of the exegete to determine (a) the human author’s intention and theological implications embodied in a specific pericope of Scripture, and (b) the Divine Author’s intention and theological implications in the same text. Jesus critiqued the Pharisees for failing to listen to Moses (John 5:45–47). But Jesus also critiqued the Sadducees for failing to listen to the voice of God *through Moses* (Matt 22:31–32). The intent of both the human author and the Divine Author must be heeded. Faithful interpretation is dependent on the exegete determining what the author/Author is doing with the text and what theological truths he is projecting to his readers. Abner Chou rightly states, “God has spoken through man in His Word and God-honoring interpretation is when we understand that intent.”⁶ Such a truth cannot be overemphasized when it comes to biblical interpretation because a faithful hermeneutic will prioritize authorial intent. A narrative cannot be treated as though it was written anonymously and as though it is up for subjective interpretation by the reader. Each narrative “bears with it, to some extent at least, artifacts of the event of writing and traces

⁴ E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

⁵ Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 58.

⁶ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 28.

of the author in its script, medium, content, [and] arrangement.”⁷ Thus, authorial intent is central to our understanding and must determine the thrust of New Testament narratives.

4. Preaching Narrative as Narrative (Retelling the Story)

After reading the passage, the preacher should not put the Bible aside and preach something different from the text. When handling a biblical narrative, it is most edifying to retell the story to the congregation. This step requires the preacher to tread carefully, though, because it might, if done poorly, cause the congregation to lose interest. However, if done with skill, retelling the story can captivate an audience! You do not have to retell every detail of the story to your congregation. Rather, recast the events in your own words in a way that highlights key characters, heightens situational dynamics, and clarifies the main idea. Explain some of the factors that are at stake by comparing or contrasting values and social norms of the first century AD with those of your own cultural context. Above all, help your congregation see why the main idea of the narrative is, in fact, the main idea.

Biblical narratives should be preached *as narratives*. Stories in the Bible should not be preached as New Testament letters or epistles, as though there are simply a series of logical “points” to squeeze out of them. It is all too common to hear preachers exposit a text from the Gospels or Acts as though it were a Pauline epistle. However, the preacher needs to be sensitive to the distinct genre and type of literature that he is expounding.⁸ A Gospel “biography” of the life of Jesus is not the letter to the Romans! Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John do not contain an opening salutation, a doctrinal

section, an ethical exhortation, and a closing greeting. The Gospels, and the narrative books of the Bible as a whole, are of an altogether different genre. Instead of preaching “points” as you would in a letter or an epistle, when it comes to biblical narrative, seek instead to preach “scenes” or “acts.” Simply put, if you are planning to preach through the New Testament narratives, tell the story!

5. Applying the Text

One of the things that should burden the preacher as he faithfully exposit the Bible is to see the Word of God change the lives of believers as they practically live out its implications in their daily walks. This does not magically happen, but it requires the pastor to be intentional in his application of the text to the church. Application is when the preacher labors to move from the text to theology to ethics, helping his audience see how any given section of Scripture facilitates transformation in their lives. This is where the rubber meets the road in preaching. Jesus pronounces woes upon the Pharisees for preaching but not *practicing* what they preached (Matt 23:1–3). True wisdom is only justified by her deeds (Matt 11:19; cf. Luke 7:35). Thus, practical application is a vital and indispensable part of preaching. It is during application that the preacher takes his time to wring theology and ethics out of a particular pericope to help his audience understand and embrace the “precepts, priorities, and practices of God’s ideal *world in front of the text*.”⁹

Duvall and Hays properly define what it means to make application of the text of Scripture: “We use the term *application* to refer to the response of the reader to the meaning of the inspired text. Application reflects the specific life situation of the reader and will vary from Christian to Christian,

⁷ Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 36.

⁸ For helpful words of caution on this point, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 229–31.

⁹ Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 126. Emphasis in original.

although it will still have some boundaries influenced by the author's meaning."¹⁰ One of the most important practices that a preacher of the Word can accomplish is transitioning appropriately from what the text is saying to how it can be applied in the lives of its hearers. Jay E. Adams helps the preacher see the need to make the sermon practical every time he has an opportunity to preach. When the word of God is applied in the life of a believer, it should not leave the listener the same, but rather, it should call him to action.¹¹ It is with this thought in mind that every pastor should take a considerable amount of time, soberly, to help his audience see both *how* and *why* they should apply the message they have just heard. Application is not just something that should happen when preaching a letter; it is vital and essential when preaching the New Testament narratives.

Although we are making a case for the fact that practical application is a non-negotiable of faithful preaching, there is a danger on the other end of the spectrum. Sometimes the preacher can move too fast from the text to application. A lot of popular preaching jumps straight from reading the Word of God to application without analyzing the original context of the passage or helping readers understand the authorial intent of the text. That kind of preaching is troubling because the listener sitting in the pews has no idea where the passage is coming from, who the original author was, and what the text meant to its original audience. The historical and literary reality of interpreting ancient texts is that there is always a gap between the original setting of a

text and modern-day listeners. One of the key skills of effective preaching is first explaining the gap to one's hearers and then bridging the gap with care and precision. An intentional movement from the text to contextual application is vital if the audience is to appreciate the passage and apply it in their own lives.

Some preachers prefer to apply their sermons at the end of every point, and others will bring in their practical application only at the conclusion of the sermon. Regardless of where one places the application, the most important principle to understand is that every sermon must be applied. The pastor's duty is to apply the sermon well so that his audience goes back home thinking deeply about what they heard. There is no way that one can apply something he does not know, so the first crucial step is to know and understand what the Bible says. Nevertheless, faithful exposition cannot stop there! Flowing out of one's knowledge and understanding, the contents and message of Scripture must then be lived out and embodied.

A TEST CASE: JOHN 3:1–21 WITH EMPHASIS ON VERSE 16

Now that we have done a brief survey of what it takes to preach New Testament narratives, in this section, we will consider a practical example from John 3:1–21 to help the preacher have a feel of what this process entails.¹² The most popular verse in this chapter and, most likely, the most popular verse in the entire Bible is John 3:16, which says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him

¹⁰ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 236. Italics in original.

¹¹ Jay E. Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, 1990), 15.

¹² Commentators are divided over whether John 3:16–21 are the words of Jesus (as in vv. 1–15) or the words of John as the author of the Gospel. Taking the former position (i.e., vv. 16–21 as the words of Jesus) are Murray J. Harris and most modern English translations of the Bible (e.g., NASB; NIV; NLT). Taking the latter position (i.e., vv. 16–21 as the words of John) are Leon Morris and D. A. Carson. See Murray J. Harris, *John*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 78; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 202; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester; Grand Rapids: Apollos; Eerdmans, 1991), 203. Whatever the correct assessment, Harris is right to conclude that the question is ultimately immaterial for those with a high view of Scripture, as he acknowledges: "Whether vv. 16–21 are Jesus' words or are John's inspired reflection on Jesus' words ... they are equally authoritative." Harris, *John*, 78. This debate involves the principle of "observing section breaks" offered in this article's earlier discussion.

should not perish but have eternal life.” While this is a well-known verse, we will (a) look at its often-neglected context, (b) consider authorial intent in John’s use of language, and (c) decide whether the verse is prescriptive or descriptive.

a) Looking at the all-important context of John 3:16

It is sad to note that many interpreters have not been able to appreciate what John 3:16 is saying because men are often quick to preach it without examining its context. For that reason, it is essential to make sure that this verse is not pulled out of thin air. It is not just a free-floating verse on an inspirational calendar! If you pay careful attention to the grammar of John 3:16, you will quickly note that the verse opens with the conjunction “for” (Greek: *gar*).¹³ This syntactical marker is a clear indication that this verse points us back to what has been said previously, which immediately calls to mind verses 14–15. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the conjunction “for,” in a more extended way, goes all the way back to the story of Nicodemus and what it means to be born again (John 3:3), which is the event that must *precede* believing unto eternal life (v. 15). In Jesus’s encounter with Nicodemus, John displays how Jesus helps Nicodemus confront the reality that the central requirement for his salvation is to be born again.

If we focus on who Nicodemus was and why he needed to hear the words of Jesus Christ, we will better appreciate the death of God’s Son on the cross. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews at the time he met Jesus (v. 1). The Pharisees were not just mere men; they were viewed as the spiritual elite of their day. They were immensely influential among the Jews and placed an enormous amount of emphasis on keeping the Jewish law (*torah*). In the estimation

of Jesus, the Pharisees’ understanding of the law was that proper obedience to it would save them (Luke 18:11–12).

Ironically, however, the Pharisees, the religious elite of their day, had a deep misunderstanding of the nature of how a man gets right with God. They had an incredibly skewed view of salvation. In the Pharisees’ understanding, God was a Lawgiver demanding people to fulfill what his law says, which is true enough—but they shockingly thought that God’s law was *keepable*! But how can human beings in a fallen world, themselves broken by the Fall, perfectly keep the demands of the high-and-exalted, thrice-holy God?! In their thinking and practice, the Pharisees showed that they actually had a low view of the law. As J. Gresham Machen asserts, “A low view of the law leads to legalism in religion; a high view of the law makes a man a seeker after grace.”¹⁴

Corresponding to their low view of the law, the Pharisees also had a low view of the character of God. The Pharisees viewed God as a mere Lawgiver and did not properly also recognize him as the One “slow to anger and abounding in love”—full of compassion and mighty to save sinners—even though such is the uniform testimony of the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 103:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). The Pharisees did not grasp the remarkable picture of how gracious and merciful God truly is. They did not grasp the fact that when a man realizes that he falls short of God’s law, he can fall to his knees and plead for the Lord’s grace. The Pharisees did many things externally to observe the law, but their hearts were far from God (Matt 15:1–10, esp. v. 8; 23:1–36). This is why Jesus repeatedly confronted their hypocrisy. The man Nicodemus was no exception to this pattern.

¹³ In Greek, this use is known as an “explanatory *gar*.” Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament with Scripture, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 673.

¹⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925), 179.

Bringing things full circle back to John 3:16, the “giving” of the Son by the Father is integrally connected to both the death of Jesus and the incarnation of Jesus. Verse 16 is structurally placed between the death of Jesus (vv. 14–15) and the incarnation of Jesus (v. 17). Putting these pieces together theologically, we can speak of the incarnation (God-come-in-the-flesh) of Jesus that culminated in his atoning death on the cross for sinners. This atoning death must be believed on for eternal life (v. 16).

At the same time, the individual who will come to believe is the one who first “experiences new birth (3:3, 5).”¹⁵ The Spirit must give spiritual birth to the natural, fleshly human being such that the Spirit activates and jumpstarts new life in that person (vv. 5–6). Regeneration (the new birth) precedes faith. John affirms the same order of salvation in 1 John 5:1, when he states that the one who “believes” that Jesus is the Christ (present tense) “has been born” of God (past tense). This reality is what Nicodemus could not understand. Figure 1 depicts John’s argument that the new birth precedes faith in chapter 3 of his Gospel.

GOD’S ACT	PRODUCES ...	MAN’S RESPONSE	OBJECT OF FAITH	END GOAL OR RESULT
<i>New birth/ regeneration</i> (John 3:3–8)	→	believes in (v. 15a)	Son of Man lifted up (v. 14)	eternal life (v. 15b)
	→	believes in (v. 16b)	[God’s] only Son (v. 16a)	eternal life (v. 16b)

FIGURE 1. JOHN’S ARGUMENT THAT THE NEW BIRTH (REGENERATION) PRECEDES FAITH

b. Considering authorial intent regarding use of language in John 3:16

In doing a word study of this verse, one of the difficult interpretive issues comes from the word “world” (Greek: *kosmos*). What is the “world” that John is talking about here? Is it a term that refers to the physical created realm? Does it refer to the badness of humanity? Does it refer to all of humanity? If so, does it refer to all of humanity at the time of John’s writing? Or does it refer to every human being who has ever lived without exception in any age of human existence? The possibilities of meaning start to make the reader dizzy.

In asking this difficult question, it is easy to see how at this point any reader could impose their own preferred meaning of the word “world” onto the text. But here is the exact point at which the importance of authorial intent again must be asserted. It is not what I as the reader think the text *should* mean that is of significance; rather, the question centers on what John the author *meant*. Looking at the surrounding context of John 3:16, we must again remind ourselves that this verse (“For God so loved the world ...”) flows directly out of the Nicodemus narrative. And so, we must take a step back and understand that John 3:16 is *sandwiched between* the Nicodemus narrative—Jesus’s conversation with one of the Jewish elites (John 3:1–15)—and the Samaritan woman narrative (4:1–42)—Jesus’s conversation with a non-

¹⁵ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 206.

Jew, one outside the people of Israel. Thus, the true meaning of “world” begins to come into focus. God doesn’t just love the Jewish people. He has given Jesus to *the world*, meaning those who are both Jews and Gentiles, regardless of ethnicity!¹⁶ Figure 2 shows a structural analysis of John chapters 3–4.

CONVERSATION PARTNER	Nicodemus	← “For God so loved the world (3:16; Greek: <i>kosmos</i>) ...” →	Samaritan woman
REPUTATION OF CONVERSATION PARTNER	Pharisee/religious elite (3:1, 10)		Dishonorable (4:17–18)
ETHNICITY OF CONVERSATION PARTNER	Jew (3:1)		Gentile (4:9)

FIGURE 2. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN CHAPTERS 3–4 IN RELATION TO HIS USE OF “WORLD” IN 3:16

Those who will come to believe in Jesus from “the world” are those who have been born again (3:3), those born of the Spirit (vv. 5–8), all who recognize and believe in the Son of Man who has been lifted up for the sins of sinners. In chapter 3, Nicodemus did not understand his own personal need for salvation. And he certainly didn’t understand that salvation would be extended beyond his own prized people group (3:1). Leon Morris is instructive on this point: “The Jew was ready enough to think of God as loving Israel, but no passage appears to be cited in which any Jewish writer maintains that God loved the world. It is a distinctively Christian idea that God’s love is wide enough to embrace all people. His love is not confined to any national group or spiritual elite.”¹⁷

Just as Moses lifted up a bronze snake to rescue the grumbling Israelites from the venomous bites of serpents (3:14; Num 21:8–9), so too, God the Father lifts up the Son of Man in his atoning death for those who have already been bitten by a much more dangerous serpent—sin. Everyone who looks to the lifted-up Son will be cured not just in the here-and-now, but for all of eternity (John 3:14–15). Whoever believes in God’s one and only Son “should not perish but have eternal life” (v. 16). And thus, we come to understand the theological meaning of John 3:16. God the Father’s giving of his Son has universal *implications* as God draws in those from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation (Rev 5:9), even while it does not lead us to posit *universalism* (the idea that every human being will be saved).

c. Toward Application: Deciding whether components in John 3:16 are descriptive or prescriptive

One challenge that is important to navigate when handling the New Testament narratives is deciding whether the text is descriptive or prescriptive. This question is especially important as we start to make application to our present-day audience. In short, does the text describe *that* something happened

¹⁶ This marvelous feat of redemption has resulted in an African and an Anglo who, through their shared belief in Christ, collaborated on this very article!

¹⁷ Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 203.

(descriptive) or does it elicit a response that something *should* happen (prescriptive)?¹⁸ Putting John 3:16 under the test of these two words, it is obvious that the verse is not simply relaying information. Yes, God the Father gave his only Son. John’s Gospel relates that act of giving in *descriptive* fashion. But the Father gave the Son for a purpose—so “that” whoever believes in him should not perish.¹⁹ The second half of verse 16 adds something that is not just a recounting of information but is *prescriptive* in nature. Here John’s Gospel demands the reader to act. Figure 3 depicts the descriptive and prescriptive elements in John 3:16.

<i>Descriptive</i> (John 3:16a)	Explanation Action Result	For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son
<i>Prescriptive</i> (John 3:16b)	Purpose Negative Positive	that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life

FIGURE 3. DESCRIPTIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS IN A PHRASE DIAGRAM OF JOHN 3:16

Putting together the two halves of John 3:16, the first half of this verse describes what God did, gloriously so, in sending the Son—but then it highlights the responsibility of man and calls for a human response in the verse’s latter half. Thus, John 3:16 has both descriptive and prescriptive elements. God, in love, has made a way for fallen man to enjoy everlasting life, by sending his only Son; but man is called upon to “believe” in the Son of God by faith. So, too, in the present day, we must call upon fallen men to behold the Son and to put their trust in him. Based on what God has *done*, there is something men must *do*! As faithful preachers, we must freely offer the gospel—and we, too, must actively call for a response.²⁰

CONCLUSION

Having set forth five steps that are essential in preaching New Testament narratives, we considered a practical example from John 3:1–21 with a special emphasis on its most famous verse, John 3:16. Looking at the overarching context of John 3:16 (particularly the Nicodemus story) helped us to understand what must come prior to a person’s belief and inheritance of eternal life—new birth. Observing John’s structure and framing of John 3:16 inside two larger narratives helped us to understand his meaning of the word “world” to include both Jews and Gentiles. Finding both descriptive and prescriptive components in John 3:16 helped us to see that we, too, as present-day preachers, cannot stop at simply declaring that God loves the world. We must call sinful hearers to believe in the Son of God for eternal life.

¹⁸ To help my students think through these matters when analyzing New Testament narratives, I (Jeff) use the question, “Is this event (or statement) commanded, commended, rebuked, or reported?” A text that is *descriptive* would be one that is simply reported. A text that is *prescriptive* would have something commanded or commended in it.

¹⁹ The Greek word rendered by the ESV as “that” (also rendered as “in order that” or “so that”) is *hina*, which introduces a purpose clause. Harris, *John*, 78.

²⁰ For a rich discussion of the free offer of the gospel, see John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 4:113–32.

As a closing word, it is all-important in preaching John 3:1–21 and in expounding its key verse, John 3:16, to preach the narrative *as narrative*. We have made a list of “points” or “principles” in this article in order to present a sound method of approaching the text. But in preaching the text, we need to *tell the story*! And we exhort our readers of this article to do just that. Tell the story of the self-righteous Pharisee who met with Jesus at night, not understanding that he himself needed a heart-change. Tell the story of the Savior who came to introduce the coming Spirit who would captivate hearts for God. Tell the story of Moses lifting up a bronze snake in the wilderness so that snake-bitten people might live. But above all, tell the story of a Father’s love that is so great that he would send his Son to die for sin-bitten sinners—not only for the lost sheep of Israel, but for sheep from pastures all across the globe. •

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Preaching the Letters

by Josh Buice

INTRODUCTION

The preaching of the Bible is God's sovereignly ordained means of awakening dead souls to life and bringing order to the local church's life and worship (Titus 1–2). There is no other substitute. The local church will never discover a better means of growth that reaches beyond the preaching of sacred Scripture. No other instrument can create the same degree of life or spiritual depth in the hearts of God's people. God has not planned for his church to be built upon schematic methods or empty religious trickery. Therefore, it is the will of God for his Word to be central among his people. Through the weekly preaching and teaching of the Bible, God's people will be shaped, confronted, reprovved, rebuked, and exhorted. Faithful biblical exposition will result in a more sanctified and holy people.

The Bible contains an array of genres including narrative, law, poetry, proverb, prophecy, Gospel, parable, history, and apocalyptic, but one of the greatest sections of the Bible is found in the New Testament letters. God has ordained for these letters to be used from the beginning for the formation and sanctification of his church.

RECOGNIZING THE PROMINENCE OF THE LETTERS

Letter writing was a common means of communication within the early Christian communities. This was the common practice in the Greco-Roman world during the time when the New Testament was compiled. Important letters would serve as a channel of communication to deliver vitally important doctrine and corrective messages to local churches from the hands of the apostles. The ancient letters that we have within our New Testament are often referred to as epistles.

While some voices have attempted to make a clear distinction between common ancient letters and epistles, it would be foolish to press that point too far. Dwight M. Pratt observes:

The epistles of the N.T. [New Testament] are lifted into a distinct category by their spiritual eminence and power, and have given the word *epistle* a meaning and quality that will forever distinguish it from *letter*.¹

The point that should be made is that there is little difference in the style, vocabulary, and medium (papyrus) between written communication inside

¹ Dwight M. Pratt, "Epistle," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 2:967. Italics in original.

and outside of the Christian community during the New Testament period, but the essential distinction is wrought by the Spirit of God who moved upon certain chosen vessels to bring about the letters of our New Testament (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). We should be free to use the words “letter” and “epistle” interchangeably, provided that we see a qualitative difference when we are examining a divinely inspired writing in this genre from our New Testament canon.

The Spirit of God has placed the letters of the biblical canon in a prominent position. Out of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, twenty-one of its books are letters. Regarding the location of the various epistles in the New Testament corpus, however, D. Edmond Hiebert observes:

Modern scholarship is not agreed on the question of the proper place for these [General] epistles in the canon. Influenced by the order generally found in ancient manuscripts, they were placed before the Pauline epistles by Tischendorf, Tregelles, and Westcott and Hort in their editions of the Greek text. But the popular Greek text of Nestle follows the order found in our English canon [i.e., General epistles *after* Pauline epistles], which adopts the order of Jerome in the Vulgate.²

In contrast to other literature found in the Bible, the didactic style of letters often reveals structures and themes with more clarity than other literary genres. Even so, while these letters may seem easier to interpret than other genres such as proverbs, prophecy, or apocalyptic—we must not underestimate the letters nor relegate them to some elementary position within the biblical canon. Interpreting the letters is essential to preaching the whole counsel of God.

In addition to his canonical letters, the apostle Paul alludes to additional extra-biblical letters he

penned to various churches which are obviously not included in our New Testament (1 Cor 5:9; 2 Cor 2:3–4; Col 4:16). Additionally, Paul reveals plans to provide letters of commendation to the Corinthians for the men who would be entrusted with bringing a financial gift from the Gentile churches to Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:3). In similar fashion, the early church leaders in Jerusalem sent a letter addressed to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, as detailed in Acts 15:23. Likewise, the believers in Ephesus composed a letter on behalf of Apollos to the brothers in Achaia (Acts 18:27). These instances underscore the rich letter exchanges and communication practices within the early Christian communities, providing valuable insights into the doctrinal convictions and organizational dynamics of these local churches.

The letters of our New Testament canon can be organized into two main groupings: (a) General letters; and (b) Pauline letters. Within these two groups, there is an overlap of structure and characteristics at a basic level, but there are also some unique aspects to these two categories that deserve our attention.

GENERAL LETTERS

The General Epistles, or Catholic (i.e., universal) Epistles as they have been referenced in previous scholarship, refer to those letters in the New Testament that are not attributed to the apostle Paul and are not explicitly addressed to specific local churches (with the possible exception of 2 John). John Calvin writes:

The word “Catholic,” or General, as applied to the Epistles here explained, has been differently understood. Some have thought that they have been thus called, because they contain catholic truths; but other Epistles might, for this reason, be also called catholic. Others have supposed that

² D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Non-Pauline Epistles*, vol. 3, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (N.p.: Gabriel Publishing, 2003), 19–20.

catholic is synonymous with canonical; but in this case also there is no more reason for applying the word to these Epistles than to any other Epistles. But the more probable opinion is, that they were called Catholic, or General, because they were not written to any particular Church, but to Jewish or to Gentile Christians generally.³

Over time, the term “General Epistle” or “General Letter” became the standard terminology. D. Edmond Hiebert writes, “The term ‘General Epistles’ is a convenient label for these seven epistles as a group, although the term is not strictly accurate.”⁴ This category includes Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

The contributions of figures such as James, the brother of our Lord, as well as Peter, who served as the leader of the inner circle of the apostles, must not be minimized. Within James’s letter, he includes an important section related to the relationship between faith and works (Jas 2:14–26), and at the hands of Peter we have one of the most important doctrinal statements regarding the source of Scripture (2 Pet 1:16–21). In addition, the letters of John press the assurance and confirmation of salvation (1 John 5:13) in the life of a believer, while Jude emphasizes the need to contend for the faith (Jude 3). All of these letters serve as formative and organizational works used by the Lord in the life of the early church that will continue until Christ returns.

PAULINE LETTERS

The apostle Paul’s ministry is without question one of the largest pieces of the redemptive plan of God to save his people, and Paul’s letters are essential to the New Testament canon. The letters penned by Paul include Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians,

Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Not only do these thirteen letters demonstrate the importance of Paul’s ministry, but Romans is arguably one of the most important books in all of the biblical canon. D. Edmond Hiebert explains:

The New Testament is striking in that practically one-third of its content [in terms of number of words] is letters. Twenty-one of the twenty-seven books are epistles. Of these twenty-one, thirteen bear the name of the apostle Paul. They form the bulk of the epistolary section of the New Testament.⁵

Within Paul’s letters we find many different emphases that include personal greetings, travel plans, words of correction, and words of commendation. Paul’s letters contain both doctrinal precision and practical exhortation. Tom Schreiner writes:

Several examples reveal the circumstantial nature of the letters. Clearly Paul wrote Galatians because the Galatian churches were abandoning the Pauline gospel (Gal. 1:6–9; 5:2–6). He wrote Colossians to stave off a new heresy that had the potential of making inroads in the church (Col. 2:4–23). Various problems plagued the Corinthian church, and thus Paul wrote our two canonical letters to them. Philippians seems to have been written for several reasons. The church has sent Paul a gift, and he wants to express his thanks (1:3–8; 4:10–14). In addition, disunity was probably surfacing in the church (1:27–2:11; 4:2–3), and Paul wants to warn the church regarding the danger of false teachers (3:2–4:1). All of the Pastoral Letters (1–2 Timothy,

³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), v–vi.

⁴ Hiebert, *Non-Pauline Epistles*, 17.

⁵ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Pauline Epistles*, vol. 2, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (N.p.: Gabriel Publishing, 2003), 13.

Titus) were written to strengthen churches in healthy teaching because false teaching was threatening the churches.⁶

Paul's letters can be organized into three sub-categories based on their focus. These categories include *theological letters* (Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1–2 Thessalonians), *prison letters* (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon), and *pastoral letters* (1–2 Timothy and Titus). These groups are established according to their historical setting and context along with the major theme and aim. The prison letters have an aroma of suffering and perseverance in the faith while the theological letters deliver weighty truths such as justification by faith.

The Pauline letters are absolutely vital to the Christian life and to the church of Jesus Christ. The following description by Philip Schaff is a fitting encapsulation of Paul's ministry within the New Testament canon:

Tracts for the times, they are tracts for all times. Children of the fleeting moment, they contain truths of infinite moment. They compress more ideas in fewer words than any other writings, human or divine, excepting the Gospels. They discuss the highest themes which can challenge an immortal mind.... And all this before humble little societies of poor, uncultured artisans, freedmen and slaves! And yet they are of more real and general value to the church than all the systems of theology from Origen to Schleiermacher—yea, than all the confessions of faith.⁷

PREACHING THE POINT OF THE LETTER—NOT THE OCCASION

The aim of *expository preaching*, which is another way of describing *biblical preaching*, is to strive to make the main point of the passage the main point of the sermon. A common temptation for preachers is to focus on one specific tree's bark without a proper view of the forest as a whole. Another temptation common to preachers is to preach with a view of the forest without giving attention to the details of the bark on the individual trees. The task in expository preaching is to preach the main point of each paragraph while consistently remaining connected to the main point of the entire letter.

The letters within the New Testament are similar in genre but vary in characteristics. The longest letter is Romans (7,111 words) and the shortest is 3 John (219 words). Although some voices such as Adolf Deissmann have labored to designate Paul's writings as "letters" in distinction from the other New Testament letters as general "epistles," we must note that all of the letters in the New Testament are epistles and considered occasional at some level.⁸ When we assert that the letters of the New Testament are occasional, we simply mean that they are penned in such a way as to deal with specific circumstances, problems, or situations unique to people in a particular geographic location within a distinct historical context (even when the audience is not explicitly named).

We approach the New Testament letters remembering that these letters were not written *to* us, but they were written *for* us. God used specific men to pen these letters to their recipients and preserved them in the New Testament canon for God's church throughout the ages.

We live life in modern cities with modern roads, buildings, waste management, and transportation,

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 31.

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1910), 1:741.

⁸ Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), 228–41.

as we are surrounded by a multiplicity of things that our ancient brothers and sisters in Christ never envisioned in their day, including social media and air transportation. In other words, our occasions may be far different than the occasions of the New Testament letters—but the point of the entire letter is very much applicable to a local church meeting in the heart of New York City or in a small rural building on the plains of sub-Saharan Africa.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written that “the business of preaching is to relate the teaching of the Scriptures to what is happening in our own day.”⁹ The task in preaching is to drive home the main point of the text while applying the truth to the modern audience as the application is bridged from the ancient letter’s setting. Schreiner is helpful at this point:

One of the most crucial points to remember in interpreting Paul’s Letters is that they were written to address specific situations. They are not systematic treatises intended to present a complete Christian theology. They are pastoral works in which Paul applies his theology to specific problems in the churches.¹⁰

PREACHING THE PARTS OF THE LETTER

When Paul called the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet with him at Miletus, he not only warned them about the wolves who would enter the church with a desire to devour the flock of God. He likewise reminded them that he had committed himself to proclaiming “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Paul had labored to expound Old Testament texts as he pointed them to Jesus Christ.

That remains the same duty of the modern

expositor. We are called to preach the whole counsel of God’s Word which necessitates the proclamation of every part of the New Testament letters from the opening words to the closing statements. Every word matters. The Bible does not contain any wasted vocabulary.

In the letters of the New Testament, we have glimpses of the early church worshipping, fellowshiping, planting churches, evangelizing unbelievers, establishing a faithful ecclesiology, and dealing with a multitude of controversies and schisms. Not only do we have these snapshots of the early church’s life, but we also have snippets of the early church’s creeds, confessions, prayers, and hymns which are intentionally embedded in these letters.

These letters contain relevant points of application for today’s church while remaining fixed on the sure foundation of sound biblical theology. The task of the modern preacher is to take these letters with all of their component parts and proclaim them with authority and clarity to the modern church in such a way that God will be honored and glorified among his people.

SALUTATION

The letters of the New Testament, as well as letters of their time period, will on most occasions have a clear opening that develops with biographical data which includes the author, recipients, and on most occasions, a greeting that may include a prayer. This is important information for the expositor as he prepares to preach a New Testament letter because it gives him clues that will aid him in his research of the geographic background and historical context. For instance, if the expositor is preaching through Ephesians, he will find the following information in

⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Warfare: An Exposition of Ephesians 6:10–13* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1976), 109.

¹⁰ Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 30. When preaching Philippians 4:13, for example, the aim of perseverance through trials, suffering, and persecution must come to the forefront as the aim of the passage. Understanding the background of Paul’s imprisonment will aid in the process. This is a unique passage where the occasion of Paul’s imprisonment is connected to the central point of the text, and thus, it must be preached.

the opening two verses of the letter:

1. The author is the apostle Paul (not just a random person).
2. Paul's apostleship came by the will of God.
3. The recipients are the saints in Ephesus. This is a clear reference to the church in the city rather than to the city population as a whole.
4. Paul's common greeting mentions "grace" and "peace" that come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not only should the expositor use the biographical data, but there is also important information pertaining to the office of an apostle of Jesus Christ included in the opening words of Paul's letter. As the letter develops, Paul also references Christians as "saints," which should be properly explained. In order to faithfully preach through a New Testament letter, the opening words must be fully expounded and explained.

BODY

Within the body of a letter, the author will begin to develop the key theme (or themes) which serve the purpose of education (instruction), correction, and edification. In some cases, a single letter like 1 Corinthians may serve all three purposes. Romans is perhaps the most comprehensive doctrinal letter in the New Testament, but at the end of chapter eleven, Paul transitions from orthodoxy to his section on orthopraxy which serves the purpose of practical instruction.

The expositor will seek to identify the theme(s) or main point(s) of the letter and keep these theme(s) central as he expositors the truths from every paragraph or section throughout the body of the letter. Unlike narrative, the didactic style of the letters will tend to limit the preaching sections to smaller portions that may seem bite-sized

in comparison to other genres, but the skilled expositor will not read over the shorter sentences and pericopes without giving full attention to every word, phrase, and sentence in light of the overarching theme of the letter.

Within the body of the letter, the author may include details that deserve attention but do not directly support the overarching theme of the letter itself. Such information could serve a practical point in a single sermon or lead to a mini-series within the larger exposition of the letter itself. Tom Schreiner helpfully observes:

Some passages in the Pauline Epistles will raise questions about specific historical-cultural issues. For example, What was slavery like in the Greco-Roman world? What kind of clothing did women wear in antiquity (see 1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4)? Was it typical for women to veil themselves or wear a particular hairstyle in the Greco-Roman world (see 1 Cor. 11:2–16)? And this raises another question: What was the place of women in the Greco-Roman world?¹¹

In many ways, the letters of the New Testament will include historically relevant material that may need to be minimized or theological statements that deserve full development and exegetical precision. For instance, when Paul includes a hymn or a creedal statement (Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:15–20; 1 Tim 3:16; Eph 5:14), the text must be given proper attention for the purpose of demonstrating the use of creeds/hymns, but more importantly, for the window these texts provide into the early church's doctrinal convictions.

At the end of the third chapter of 1 Timothy, in 1 Timothy 3:16, we have an example of a possible hymn or creed as Paul writes the following words:

¹¹ Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 61–62.

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.¹²

In this one verse, we have at minimum a part of an ancient Christian hymn which was likely used as a creedal hymn of confession. The expositor must not miss such details and should understand the importance of Paul's usage of this quotation in light of Timothy's pastoral duties. As William Hendriksen observes, "Thus the X—which is the twenty-second letter of the Greek alphabet and is called *chi*—is drawn twice. We may say, therefore, that the six lines are arranged *chi*-astically. The six lines of this *Hymn in Adoration of the Christ* begin with a line about *Christ's lowly birth* and end with a reference to *his glorious ascension*."¹³ It is vitally important to unpack the nature of this text, the structure of the creedal confession, the theology of the hymn, and connect it to the theme of the pastoral focus and overarching theme of Paul's letter to Timothy.

CLOSING

The closing section of the New Testament letters can provide information that's critical to the occasion as well as instructive and necessary for the modern audience as well. Just as the expositor should not skip over the opening greeting in order to move quickly to the important material contained in the body, in order to preach the whole counsel of God's Word, the true expositor will likewise give himself to preaching the closing portion of the letter faithfully.

In some cases, it may be revealed that an amanuensis (i.e., a secretary or writing assistant) was used for the purpose of compiling the letter. This information

comes to the surface in the closing words of Paul to the church at Rome (Rom 16:22), "I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord." At other times, Paul explicitly states that he had penned the letter without an assistant (1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; 2 Thes 3:17; Phlm 19; 1 Pet 5:12). In either case, such an acknowledgment often occurs late in the letter or is embedded in its closing words. While this information does not change any doctrine contained in the body of the letter, it is still an important detail that should be documented and preached.

The concluding words of the New Testament letters include final greetings, statements of commendation, expressions of personal thanks for assistance in gospel ministry, doxologies, and travel plans. The calling of the preacher is to preach every line of the text—including what may seem to be insignificant information or merely concluding remarks. A grand example of this is the closing chapter of Romans. What may appear on the surface as a list of personal greetings or commendations, on closer examination will reveal Paul's chief purpose in writing. It will also be noted that many of the people named are women whom Paul is commending for their generosity and assistance. This demonstrates a couple of important facts, not the least of which is proof that the apostle Paul was not a male chauvinist who demeaned the value of women. Such details must be faithfully proclaimed and applied to the modern church.

As Paul concludes his letter to the church at Rome, he does so with a full orbed Christian doxology. After Paul climbed to the heights of glory with the doctrines of justification by faith and the glory of saving faith, he expresses himself with a theologically rich concluding statement. This doxology in Romans 16:25–27 is a praise-saying that ascribes glory to God, summarizes the entire letter of Romans, and points Paul's readers to their hope in Christ alone:

¹² All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

¹³ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1957), 139. Italics in original.

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

The use of a doxological statement is not unique to Paul or to the New Testament. We find doxologies in both the Old Testament and the New Testament alike. Each of the books of the Psalms concludes with a statement of praise to God (Ps 41:13; 72:18–20; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6). In the New Testament, we find doxologies in various letters such as Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Timothy, 1 Peter, and Jude.

These statements of praise deserve proper focus and attention. In the case of Paul’s letter to the church at Rome, Peter’s concluding words in his first letter, and Jude’s brief letter, these concluding words must be properly expounded with all of their theological richness while maintaining a skilled eye upon the theme and aim of the entire letter.

PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE LETTERS

As Christian preachers, regardless of the text we preach, we are called to preach Christ. Preaching is more than giving moralistic talks or theological discourses in a vacuum. We are not merely called to give theological lectures. We are heralds of the good news of salvation.

In Paul’s day, the Jews sought after signs and the Greeks after wisdom, but Paul announced that his aim was to preach “Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). We live in a day where everyone is looking for human wisdom, profitable knowledge, and politically

correct messages, but our calling as Christian preachers, in one respect, is no different from Paul’s calling or that of any other New Testament messenger—we are to point people to Christ.

In some cases, preachers make grave errors in proclaiming Christ in ways that stretch well beyond the original author’s intent. Many preachers have fallen into the abyss of allegorical interpretation without a firm commitment to the original author’s intention. William Tyndale understood this problem in his day as he opposed the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. In explaining such abuses of the Roman Catholic Church, notice how Tyndale was firmly committed to authorial intent as he speaks of the original sense of the passage:

They divide scripture into four senses, the literal, typological, allegorical, and analogical. The literal sense is become nothing at all: for the pope hath taken it clean away, and hath made it his possession. He hath partly locked it up with the false and counterfeited keys of his traditions, ceremonies, and feigned lies; and driveth men from it with violence of sword: for no man dare abide by the literal sense of the text, but under a protestation, ‘If it shall please the pope.’ ... Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the scriptures hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way.¹⁴

Our goal as expositors is to preach with a commitment to the original author’s intent, but we must nevertheless preach Christ. The main idea of the text must be the main idea of the sermon we preach. It may prove more natural to preach Christ from the letters of the New Testament than from the book of Esther in the Old Testament, but we must not drop our guard due to our nearness to the cross.

¹⁴William Tyndale, “The Obedience of a Christian Man,” in *Doctrinal Treatises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848), 303–04. See also J. W. Blench, *Preaching in England in the Late Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), 1–48.

The placement of the New Testament letters in the biblical canon is after Jesus's earthly ministry that included his brutal crucifixion and glorious resurrection that ultimately culminated in his marvelous ascension to heaven's throne. Each of the letters in the New Testament points back to the completion of Christ's work and the fulfillment of his saving mission (Matt 1:21). As a result, each letter points us to Christ at various levels, including his redemptive work, righteous life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection, and promised second coming. In short, the gospel serves as the bedrock foundation for the church that was purchased by its Savior.

CONCLUSION

The letters of the New Testament serve a pivotal role in the formation and growth of the church throughout the ages, which continues to this very hour. These letters must be preached for the good of local churches around the world. In doing so, Christ will be proclaimed and praised among his people. While there is much talk about expository preaching in our day in conservative evangelical circles, it is one thing to *call* oneself an expositor and quite another thing to actually *labor* in expository preaching week after week. If we are to preach Christ and him crucified from the whole counsel of God's Word, we must commit ourselves to rightly dividing the Word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). In order to rightly divide sacred Scripture, we must commit ourselves to preaching the letters of the New Testament with all of their richness and gospel hope. •

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Preaching the Apocalypse: The Necessity of Good and Proper Hermeneutics

by Sam Waldron

INTRODUCTION

A good and proper method of hermeneutics is, of course, required everywhere and always in preaching the Bible. The presupposition of this article is that proper principles of interpretation are especially necessary in preaching the Apocalypse, the book of our English Bible commonly called the book of Revelation. Why is this the case? It is because the Apocalypse is—well—*apocalyptic*. That is, it is mostly written in the figurative genre known as apocalyptic. Thus, the normal hermeneutical canons of interpretation must be supplemented by canons of interpretation which address the special characteristics of language in this genre of literature.

It is imperative for such a programmatic statement to be made at the outset of this article. Yes, it is true that I am getting ahead of myself. The reason is that it is not obvious to all that the book of Revelation is highly apocalyptic, and it is not apparent to all that this reality should impact, immensely, how we interpret and preach the book. In this article, I will attempt to summarize both the general and special hermeneutics which must guide us in the interpretation of the revelation found in the Apocalypse.

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

There is no more important issue in the church today than hermeneutics. No matter how correct one's doctrine of the Bible is, if one's way of interpreting it is wrong, it will completely destroy biblical authority. Harold Camping had a very adequate doctrine of biblical inerrancy, but his allegorical method of biblical interpretation enabled him to predict that the Christ would come in 1994.¹ Many cults both in the past held and even today hold high views of Scripture and yet destroy the gospel of Christ because of their bad hermeneutics. Many people claim to believe without qualification in biblical authority and yet would seek to impose feminism, thereby erasing the difference between male and female roles in the church. Why? Inadequate methods of biblical interpretation! Remember the warning of the Apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:16 that in the writings of Paul "are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction." Many people followed Paul to their own destruction because they distorted the meaning of his writings. What was the problem? Deplorable hermeneutics!

¹ Harold Camping, *1994?* (New York: Vantage Press, 1992).

The book of Revelation contains what is perhaps the most disputed passage in the Bible on the subject of biblical eschatology—Revelation 20:1–10. Because this passage has been so disputed in the history of the church, it must be studied. Further, its interpretation is so crucial and pivotal for eschatology and the biblical understanding of the climax of world history that it cannot be ignored. No one should take seriously any eschatology which fails to provide an interpretation of this portion of Scripture. The questions must be addressed: What, then, is the meaning of Revelation 20:1–10? How do you explain this passage?

Because of the special interest of this passage, I will focus my hermeneutical thoughts with regard to preaching the Apocalypse on it. I believe reflection on the general and special principles of interpretation necessary to interpret and preach this passage properly will also enlighten the whole of the Apocalypse.

Here is the passage in dispute:

[1] And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. [2] And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, [3] and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. [4] And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ

for a thousand years. [5] The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. [6] Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. [7] And when the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, [8] and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. [9] And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. [10] And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.²

When we confront a difficult passage like Revelation 20, biblical hermeneutics must take center stage and precede the detailed study of the passage. Here I want to point out a number of principles of biblical interpretation that are crucial in the interpretation and preaching of Revelation 20.

Principle 1: Grammatical-Historical Interpretation

It is commonly acknowledged that the first and most basic principle of biblical interpretation is known as grammatical-historical interpretation. Simply stated this fundamental principle says that the Bible must be interpreted in terms of the normal grammatical meaning of the language and in a way that makes sense of the historical context of the language of the passage. The original sense of the words for the original author and (secondarily for) his readers is the true sense. No

² All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from *The New American Standard Bible* (NASB) unless otherwise noted.

interpretation that forgets the original significance of the passage for its original recipients and divorces itself from its grammatical-historical meaning can be correct.

Now, what has all this to do with Revelation 20? It means that the historical context of its visions cannot be ignored in its interpretation. The exact date of the writing of the book of Revelation is disputed.³ What cannot be disputed is that it was originally written by John the apostle who was at the time of its writing exiled to Patmos for his faith and that it was written to local churches in the Roman province of Asia also suffering, more or less, for their faith (Rev 1:9; 2:2, 3, 10, 13; 3:9, 10). Interpretations that forget that these visions were recorded by a suffering apostle for a suffering church raise questions about their hermeneutical viability because they forget the principle of historical interpretation. A credible interpretation must exhibit a clear line of connection with this historical context.

Since the premillennial interpretation of this passage asserts that this passage has to do with a drastically distant period of time after the return of Christ, it has, therefore, little, direct relevance to the suffering church of John's day. Thus, up front, it faces a problem with the principle of historical interpretation.

On the other hand, the interpretation of Revelation 20:4–6 advocated by many amillennialists sees the martyrs mentioned there as a reference to those being martyred even at the time of the writing of the Apocalypse.⁴ This interpretation has ancient support in the tradition of the church. As Charles Hill has pointed out in his important book entitled

Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity, there are a number of very early allusions to Revelation 20:4–6 which see it as applying to the heavenly glory and reign of the martyrs with Christ in heaven now.⁵ Thus, the amillennial interpretation fares better when examined in light of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation.

Principle 2: Theological Interpretation

Strict attention to the grammatical-historical interpretation of the passage must be supplemented by an appreciation of its theological interpretation. This is the peculiar emphasis of Reformed hermeneutics.⁶ The Bible is a divine-human document. Each of its parts has both a human author (e.g., Isaiah the prophet or John the apostle) and a divine author (the Holy Spirit). Each part of the Bible, then, has both a specific grammatical-historical meaning because of its human author and a larger theological significance because of its divine author. To put it another way, each part of Scripture is intended by the Holy Spirit as the rule of faith and life of the church and has, therefore, a significance for the whole church.

The crucial thing that must be pointed out here is that these two sides of Scripture, human and divine, do not contradict one another. The human authorship of Scripture does not make it less divine. Its human authorship does not cancel out its inerrancy or decrease its infallibility. On the other hand, its divine authorship does not suppress the peculiar personalities or vocabularies of its human authors. Divine authorship does not mean that we can ignore either the peculiar language of the human author or the historical situation. Rather,

³ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4–27. Beale discusses the date of the Apocalypse and opts for the later date. The options are the traditional dating of the book in the late 90s of the first century AD or the preterist dating of the book just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The issue is not directly germane to the discussion of Revelation 20 here. For the preterist interpretation of the book to work, however, the early date must be adopted.

⁴ Both Beale, *Revelation*, and William Hendriksen in *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1939) advocate this interpretation of Revelation 20:4–6.

⁵ Charles Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981).

the theological interpretation always is consistent with and, in fact, grows out of the grammatical-historical interpretation of the passage.

The theological interpretation of Scripture is relevant to the Apocalypse and its interpretation in several ways. Typology and typological interpretation is grounded in the reality that God wrote the Bible with the distant future in mind (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:6, 11). Thus, some of the events it records deliberately foreshadowed future realities which the human authors could not foresee but which the Holy Spirit intended.

This observation, in turn, is relevant to the apocalyptic language characteristic of the book of Revelation. It allows the interpreter to be more open to the kind of types, shadows, and figures which inform the apocalyptic genre of literature. It provides a canonical resource on the basis of which to interpret such language confidently.

It is likely that the aversion on the part of many interpreters to typology and to symbolic and figurative language like that which pervades the book of Revelation is due to their ignorance or neglect of the theological interpretation of the Bible. Thus, they are only comfortable with literal language and literal interpretation and seek to suppress the figurative language of Scripture as much as possible. Such an aversion must and will distort their interpretation of passages like Revelation 20:1–10 that come to us mainly in the apocalyptic genre. Such language requires the principle of theological interpretation.

Principle 3: The Apocalyptic Genre of the Literature

The Character of Apocalyptic Literature. When I speak of the apocalyptic genre of Revelation 20, I have used two words I need to explain. The

adjective “apocalyptic” comes originally from the Greek word that means revelation. It may also be derived more immediately from the name of the book of Revelation. In some traditions the book is called the Apocalypse. In the present context the word, apocalyptic, has reference to the highly symbolic and dramatically figurative language. Such language is characteristic of the book of Revelation, some parts of the book of Daniel, and much of biblical prophecy. For illustrative instances of this sort of language, compare Daniel 8:1–27 and Revelation 13:1–4.

The word “genre” is a word of French origin that refers to a kind, type, or sort of literature. Thus, the apocalyptic genre of Revelation 20 refers to the fact that it is a *kind* of literature that utilizes continuously a highly symbolic and figurative form of language. It is not ordinary, literal prose.

Now the principle of biblical interpretation that is relevant here is that biblical literature must be interpreted in a way appropriate to its genre. Genre analysis is, therefore, crucial if the Bible is to be properly interpreted. R. C. Sproul has these helpful comments on the subject of genre analysis in biblical hermeneutics:

Genre analysis involves the study of such things as literary forms, figures of speech and style. We do this with all kinds of literature. We distinguish between the style of historical narratives and sermon, between realistic graphic descriptions and hyperbole. Failure to make these distinctions when dealing with the Bible can lead to a host of problems with interpretation. Literary analysis is crucial to accurate interpretation.⁷

The relevance of this discussion to Revelation 20 should be obvious. Revelation 20 is clearly written in the apocalyptic genre and should be interpreted

⁷ R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 49.

in a way that takes the present discussion into account. The opening words of Revelation 20:1, “And I saw,” inform us of the visionary and thus symbolic or apocalyptic character of the passage. This phrase often introduces visionary and apocalyptic revelation. The apostle-prophet John is seeing a vision. Since it is a vision seen in the mind’s eye of the prophet, it must not be interpreted literally. It must, rather, be interpreted figuratively and symbolically in accord with its apocalyptic genre or form. Daniel 7:2–8 provides an example of such literature:

[2] Daniel said, “I was looking in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. [3] And four great beasts were coming up from the sea, different from one another. [4] The first *was* like a lion and had *the* wings of an eagle. I kept looking until its wings were plucked, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man; a human mind also was given to it. [5] “And behold, another beast, a second one, resembling a bear. And it was raised up on one side, and three ribs *were* in its mouth between its teeth; and thus they said to it, ‘Arise, devour much meat!’ [6] After this I kept looking, and behold, another one, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird; the beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it. [7] After this I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrifying and extremely strong; and it had large iron teeth. It devoured and crushed, and trampled down the remainder with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. [8] While I was contemplating the horns, behold, another horn, a little one, came up among them, and three of the first horns were pulled out by the roots before it; and behold, this horn possessed eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth uttering great *boasts*.”

The prophet Daniel’s own reflection on this passage shows that such visionary language is

not straightforwardly literal and involves special problems of interpretation. In Daniel 7:16 the prophet says, “I approached one of those who were standing by and began asking him the exact meaning of all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of these things ...” Daniel’s words make clear that visions seen by the inner eye of the prophet or apostle are not to be interpreted literally, but figuratively. Their meaning is not immediately obvious like literal language or prose. Daniel has to inquire as to its interpretation. Inherent to apocalyptic language is the reality that its meaning is not immediately obvious to the recipient.

The difficulty and opaqueness of the apocalyptic genre is indicated by one of the first and most important passages dealing with prophetic revelation, Numbers 12:1–8. Consider that foundational passage:

[1] Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman); [2] and they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?” And the LORD heard it. [3] (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.) [4] Suddenly the LORD said to Moses and Aaron and to Miriam, “You three come out to the tent of meeting.” So the three of them came out. [5] Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the doorway of the tent, and He called Aaron and Miriam. When they had both come forward, [6] He said, “Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream. [7] Not so, with My servant Moses, He is faithful in all My household; [8] With him I speak mouth to mouth, Even openly, and not in dark sayings, And he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moses?”

Yahweh here instructs Aaron and Miriam with regard to the superiority of Moses. He does so by way of a distinction between the kind of revelation he gives to Moses and the kind of revelation he gives to “other” prophets. We see this in verses 5–8a. We come here to the key assertions which have brought us to examine this passage. Yahweh distinguishes the kind of revelation he gives to Moses from the kind he gives to prophets like Aaron and Miriam. His revelation to Moses is described in two unique and distinct ways:

- Moses beholds the form of the LORD. This does not, of course, mean that he beheld that glory which no man can see and live. Rather, it means that Moses was given the privilege of beholding a theophany of God with his physical eyes.
- The kind of revelation given to Moss is described as having an objective and clear character. It is mouth-to-mouth revelation. It is open revelation. Such revelation is, as various English translations say, plain and clear.

God’s revelation to Aaron and Miriam as prophets is explicitly contrasted with the kind of revelation given to Moses:

- The characteristic form of prophetic revelation is not by theophany in which the form of the Lord is seen by the outer eye, but it is by vision and dream made known to the inner eye of the prophet.
- This kind of revelation is then described as having the character of *not* being clear, but as having the character of a dark saying. The word is defined as a riddle or enigma.

It must be qualified carefully that it is not the *authority* of the prophetic revelation which is inferior to Moses. It is rather the *clarity* of the

prophetic revelation that is inferior to that given to Moses. Theophany is not more authoritative, but it is more open and clear. Dreams and visions are more dark and enigmatic.

The Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature. All this leads to a natural and important question: How should such symbolic, apocalyptic, or figurative language be properly interpreted? Several common-sense answers can be made to this question:

First, apocalyptic passages must be interpreted in a way that is consistent.

Apocalyptic passages ought not to be suddenly interpreted literally and then figuratively at the whim of the interpreter. For instance, there is no good reason to exclude indications of time (i.e., the 1,000 years) from the generally symbolic or figurative character of the passage.

Second, apocalyptic passages must be interpreted by means of the clues or explanations given in the immediate passage.

For instance, in Revelation 20:2 we have such an immediate explanation: “And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan...” In the vision John sees “the dragon, the serpent of old.” This is figurative language. He immediately, however, interpolates a literal explanation for what he sees. This visionary dragon, he says, in the real world where we live, is the devil or Satan.

Third, the visionary world and the real world must be both distinguished and related.

The distinction between the world of the vision and the real world where we live suggests another important skill or principle of interpretation when interpreting apocalyptic passages. We must both be able to delineate and yet properly to compare these two worlds.⁸ The vision which the prophet

⁸ I believe that I am articulating the same basic viewpoint here as G. K. Beale does when he distinguishes three levels of communication in the apocalyptic genre of Revelation. He distinguishes a visionary level, a referential level, and a symbolic level of communication. He complains that many interpreters “typically neglect the visionary and symbolic levels of communication by collapsing them into the referential, historical level.” Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 973–74. This is approximately what I mean when I speak of the visionary world, the real world, and the gate of symbolic translation.

sees does not literally exist anywhere in the space-time universe. It is a visionary world that exists only before the inner eye of the prophet through the revealing power of the Spirit of God. None of it exists in the outer world which can be seen by his external eye. Yet it symbolizes that world. One unique feature of apocalyptic literature like that found in Daniel and Revelation is the continued character of the symbols. You do not have a symbol here and there sprinkled in a basically literal passage. You have long-continued, whole, symbolic passages with, perhaps, here and there sprinkled in an explanation of what this points to in the literal world. This is the character of the vision of Revelation 20:1–10. It is continuously symbolic throughout with occasional exceptions like the opening words, “And I saw,” and the words of verse 2 mentioned previously.

This means that we must not take the vision *literally*, even though we must take the vision *seriously*. We must not cut symbols out of the visionary world and paste them into the real world. They may only come into the real world through the gate of symbolic translation.⁹

Let me give an illustration of this principle. In the history of the interpretation of Revelation 20 not a few have puzzled over the beheaded martyrs of verse 4. A failure to understand the principle I have just been articulating has led some to affirm that only beheaded martyrs, or at least only martyrs, or perhaps only especially martyrs, share in the reign of Christ. Such affirmations raise all sorts of silly questions. Is beheading more heroic (or meritorious!) than being burnt at the stake? Does a person actually have to die to be a martyr for Christ? Does other suffering short of death allow one to reign with Christ?

All such reactions to the text fail to see that the beheaded martyrs of verse 4 are part of the

world of vision. In the vision they are beheaded by a (the) beast for failure to accept a tattoo in their foreheads or hands indicating allegiance to him. But none of this is to be taken literally. The question must be asked: How does all this look when it comes through the gate of symbolic translation? We must beware of taking things seen in visions, cutting them out, and pasting them without symbolic translation into the real world.

Fourth, biblical symbols in apocalyptic passages must be interpreted by means of their biblical origin, background, and usage, if they are not explained in the immediate context. Great help can be derived in interpreting New Testament symbols by studying Old Testament passages from which such symbolism is derived. The reference to “the birds of the air nesting in the mustard tree” in the parable of the mustard seed in Luke 13:19 is illuminated by a study of the use of this phrase in two Old Testament passages (Ezek 17:22–24; Dan 4:12, 21–22) where it is used of nations coming under the rule of great kingdoms.

Fifth, the interpretive principle known as the analogy of Scripture must also be applied. No interpretation inconsistent with the analogy of Scripture is tenable. The Westminster Confession and 1689 Second London Baptist Confession agree in asserting that “the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself” (chapter 1, paragraph 9). The Bible is inerrant and infallible. No interpretation is acceptable that creates internal conflict in the meaning of Scripture.

One plain and important application of the principle of the analogy of Scripture is noted in the further statement in the same paragraph in the Westminster and Second London Confessions: “and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not

⁹ I admit here that I am thinking of the wardrobe in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first book of his *Chronicles of Narnia*. Narnian realities must come through the wardrobe and be transmuted into what they are in our world. Aslan is not a great lion in our world, but someone else!

manifold, but one), it must be searched by other places that speak more clearly.” The application of this principle to the highly figurative and disputed language of Revelation 20 is manifold.

The symbolic language of Revelation 20 must be searched out in light of other and plainer Scriptures. The paramount question—When is Satan bound?—must be answered on the basis of the teaching of the rest of the Scriptures. The parallel passages (Matt 12:28, 29; Luke 10:18; John 12:31–32; Col 2:15; Heb 2:14) in other New Testament books all point to an event which took place at Christ’s first advent. Furthermore, no interpretation of a highly symbolic passage that contradicts the plain meaning of straightforward, literal, or prosaic passages is acceptable. It demands that plain passages must be given priority over and must interpret obscure passages.

A premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:1–10 certainly contradicts such principles. To give just one example, the general judgment according to the clear teaching of Scripture occurs at Christ’s second coming (Rom 2:1–16; 2 Pet 3:3–18; Matt 25:31–46). In Revelation 20:11–15—verses subsequent (as premillennialists agree) to the millennium passage in verses 1–10—the general judgment is depicted. If Revelation 20:11–15 is regarded as chronologically subsequent to Revelation 20:1–10 (as it is by premillennialists), then the analogy of faith demands that the “1,000 years” and “little season” *precede* the second coming of Christ.

These considerations are particularly crushing to premillennialism when we remind ourselves of the state of the doctrinal question about the millennium. The interpretation of Revelation 20 is critical to the premillennialist. He must prove that Revelation 20 teaches a future millennium after Christ’s return and that no other interpretation is

possible. If there is another feasible interpretation of this passage, then premillennialism is left without its central exegetical pillar. Indeed, Ladd is candid enough to admit that Revelation 20 is the sole exegetical pillar of premillennialism.¹⁰

Principle 4: The Non-Consecutive Structure of the Book of Revelation

Biblical prophecy often has a non-consecutive structure that recapitulates or repeats different perspectives about the same period.¹¹ After his fine exposition of Matthew 24–25, John Murray carefully underscores this in one of his conclusions:

The discourse, as to structure, is recapitulatory to a considerable extent. It is not, therefore, continuously progressive. We are repeatedly brought to the advent and informed of its various features, concomitants, and consequences (vv. 14, 29–31, 37–41; 25:31–46). We should expect for this reason, that revelation respecting the future would in other cases follow this pattern. At least we should be alert to the propriety of this structure in predictive prophecy.¹²

The book of Revelation is, like Matthew 24 and 25, also not a consecutive, chronological prophecy of history. Some interpreters (for example, those of the historicist and futurist schools) have begun with chapter four and assumed that each prophecy occurs in consecutive, chronological order in history right through chapter 22. The seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls, so it is thought, occur in consecutive chronological order in history. Whatever one’s conclusion about the structure of the book of Revelation, this view must be rejected.

There are clear instances of repetition or recapitulation in the book of Revelation. For instance, Revelation 11:18 speaks of the final

¹⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, 182.

¹¹ See Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 974–83, for an extensive defense of the non-consecutive chronological relation of Revelation 19 and 20:1–10.

¹² John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:398–99.

judgment, while the immediately following passage (cf. 12:3, 5) returns to the period of Christ's first advent and speaks of His birth and ascension to the throne of God in heaven. This clearly shows that recapitulation must be taken into account in the interpretation of the book of Revelation and that systems of interpretation (like that of historicism) which insist on a consecutive, chronological interpretation of the book cannot be seriously entertained.

The significance of this for our present discussion is as follows. Simply because Revelation 20 follows the description of (what is apparently) the second advent of Christ in chapter 19, this does not demand that the historical fulfillment of the visions in Revelation 20 be chronologically subsequent to the historical fulfillment of the visions in chapter 19. Just as Revelation 12 takes us back to the beginning of the gospel age, so also may Revelation 20 do the same.

Principle 5: The Kingdom-Theme of Revelation 20

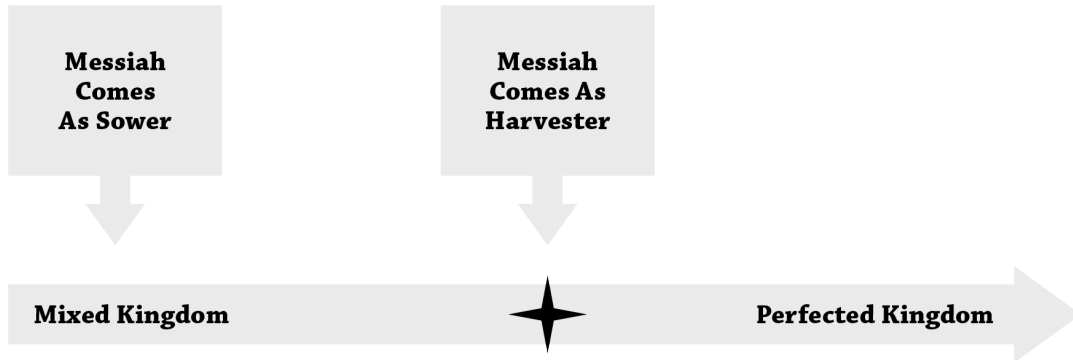
The millennial reign of Christ is clearly the theme of Revelation 20, which becomes especially evident in verses 2 through 7. Like Matthew 13 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–28, the theme, therefore, of Revelation 20:1–10 is the coming of the kingdom of God. This points us to the importance of less figurative passages like Matthew 13 and 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 for the interpretation of Revelation 20:1–10. When a comparison is made with those passages, the similarities and parallels are striking. The significance of this observation against premillennialism is obvious because it demands that the millennial reign be placed prior to Christ's second coming. The following chart attempts to show the striking character and significance of these parallels.

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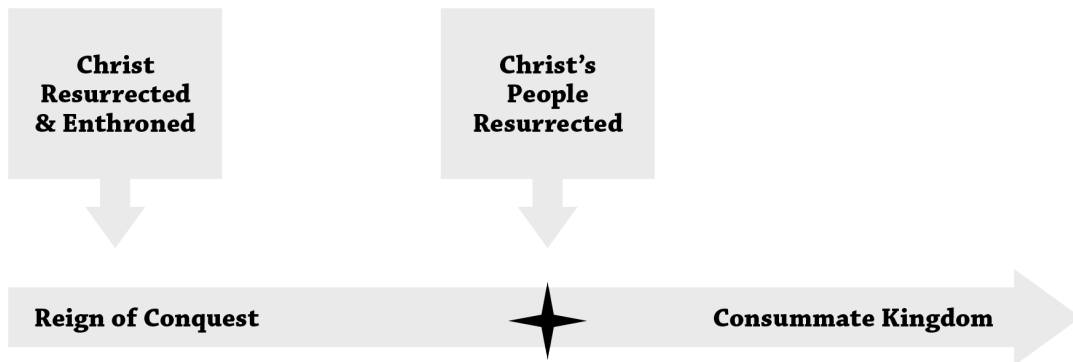


THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM

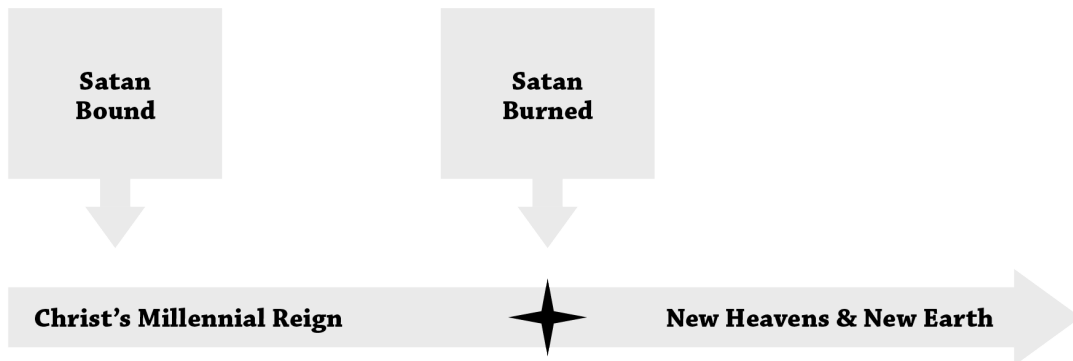
MATTHEW 13



1 CORINTHIANS 15



REVELATION 20



Principle 6: The Internal Structure of Revelation 20:1–10

Any proper interpretation and preaching of a passage of Scripture involves an honest evaluation of its own structure and development. This evaluation of the structure and development of a passage begins with the identification of its theme. Thankfully, both the theme and the development of Revelation 20 are clear in their essential features.

The common theme of these verses is clearly the millennial reign of Christ. This point, I think, can be admitted by all interpretive viewpoints. The 1,000 years both as the period of Satan’s binding and the period of Christ’s reign is mentioned six times in the passage: once each in verses 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. These verses clearly divide themselves into three paragraphs or major sections: verses 1–3, verses 4–6, and verses 7–10. From one point of view the arrangement of these verses is chronological:

- Verses 1–3: The Inauguration of the Reign
- Verses 4–6: The Continuation of the Reign
- Verses 7–10: The Completion of the Reign

From another point of view an ABA structure may be discerned:

- Verses 1–3: The millennial reign on earth
- Verses 4–6: The millennial reign in heaven
- Verses 7–10: The millennial reign on earth

The full justification for saying that verses 4–6 deal with the millennial reign in heaven would require a full exposition of the passage beyond our purview here. Yet, it is clear that the subject matter of verses 4–6 is clearly distinct from that of verses 1–3 and 7–10, while these two paragraphs are similar in their language. Verses 4–6 deal with the “souls” who reign with Christ. Verses 1–3 and 7–10 deal with Satan and the nations.

CONCLUSION

A careful and submissive adherence to good and proper hermeneutical principles will bring light even to the deep darkness of Revelation 20:1–10. Yes, even into the deepest darkness of verses 4–6 they will shine light. Because they bring such light to the passage, they enable the preacher to bring light to his hearers from the passage. This has been my experience, and it is my testimony with regard to preaching the Apocalypse. Employing sound interpretive principles will enable faithful preachers to interpret and exposit the glorious revelation given to us in the Apocalypse. •

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Preaching Challenges for Each Genre of Scripture

CONTRIBUTOR	GENRE OF SCRIPTURE ADDRESSED	UNIQUE CHALLENGES	CASE STUDY (IF APPLICABLE)
Brian Borgman	Pentateuch (Gen–Deut)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balancing Christ-centered preaching and exemplary preaching Distinguishing still-relevant principles from various OT laws 	N/A
James B. Law	OT Historical Books (Josh–Esth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handling the sheer length of various narratives Navigating the non-propositional nature of narratives 	Ezra (panoramic approach) 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2 (selective approach) Joshua (consecutive approach)
Grant Castleberry	Poets (Job–Song)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discerning truthful versus misdirected speech (e.g., Job) Recognizing poetic parallelism Viewing a negative apologetic function (e.g., Eccl) 	N/A
Jason S. DeRouchie	Prophets (Isa–Mal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connecting the prophet to his historical setting Identifying the prophetic speech type Establishing the book’s function covenantally and canonically 	Zephaniah
Maya Kuthyola & Jeff Moore	NT Narrative Books (Matt–Acts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizing the full context of a verse or episode Preaching “scenes” and “acts” rather than logical “points” Determining descriptive versus prescriptive accounts 	John 3:1–21, esp. 3:16
Josh Buice	Letters (Rom–Jude)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying the point of the letter, not just the occasion Preaching the less prominent parts of the letter (e.g., salutation and closing) 	N/A
Sam Waldron	Apocalypse (Rev)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discerning apocalyptic symbolism Distinguishing the visionary world from the real world Recognizing consecutive versus non-consecutive structure 	Revelation 20:1–10

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