

PREACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE POST MODERN WORLD

Lynn Jost

PREFACE: THE ELMER MARTENS LEGACY

I love to preach Old Testament texts. I owe my interest in the Hebrew Bible more to Elmer Martens than to any other person. Elmer taught me ancient Israel's world, gave me confident understanding of Old Testament theology, and modeled creativity in proclaiming the Hebrew Bible. My debt is not unique. Elmer shaped a generation of Mennonite Brethren preachers, creating a living legacy through his careful scholarship and deep Christian commitment.

Elmer's approach corresponded to the modern world in which he taught. He devoted his theological investigation to the pursuit of a biblical center, a search which uncovered the satisfying fourfold divine design. This theological center, perhaps more adequately than the host of other "centers" proposed by more widely acclaimed scholars, anticipated the post modern penchant for polyvalence. The center involves multiple tracks of God's activity. Elmer's dedication to a scientific biblical study method produced the "formal" approach. The 1994 consultation on

Lynn Jost, a graduate of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, is Assistant Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kansas. He acknowledges his indebtedness to Elmer in the article above.

*... we have
spoken for
God ... when
our listeners
are liberated
to experience
God*

*Direction
Fall, 1996
Vol. 25, No. 2*

“Teaching and Appropriating the Bible” for Mennonite Brethren Bible teachers was Elmer’s brainchild where he made clear his preference for the single primary interpretation of any text. In so doing Elmer was serving as a faithful exegete and homiletician bridging the gap between the world of the ancient text and his modern audience.

PURPOSE: COMMUNICATING WITH POST MODERNS

“Post modern” is a slippery term. For some “post modern” describes the collapse of Enlightenment empirical rationalism. “post modern” then becomes shorthand for the void left with the demise of an epoch. Others believe that a new synthesis is emerging. To these “post modern” may describe the skeptical, relativistic philosophy of deconstruction or the contemporary turn to spiritualism over objective reason. Whatever else, “Post modern” points to change, to a radically different cultural paradigm.

Our interest in this article is to stand on the shoulders of giants like Elmer Martens; we peer into the unknown future to consider how preaching from the Old Testament can address the post modern world. If we agree that each sermon must be addressed not simply to “Boxholder” or “To Whom It May Concern” but to a particular audience (Craddock, p. 137), we must ask how preaching will change so as to communicate with Post modern people. The issue is only complicated by our attempts to proclaim the older testament, a task which has confounded the church since the New Testament was written. This paper argues that preaching the Old Testament is a challenge well-suited to the Post modern world.

COLLAPSE OF “METANARRATIVE”

Perhaps the greatest threat to preachers seeking to proclaim the Bible to the Post modern world is the breakdown in communication. As preachers we are facing a problem greater than our congregations’ biblical illiteracy. Increasingly, we have come to recognize that communication can be distorted by the distinct personal and social situation of the audience. The diverse interpretations of Jesus’s quotation of Deuteronomy 15:11 (“The poor you shall have with you always”) reveal the impact of economic position on interpretation.

David Buttrick identifies the cultural collapse as a “loss of correspondence” (1995, p. 3). No longer does our culture support a medieval correspondence between the terrestrial and celestial hierarchies or an Enlightenment analogy of reason which thought that God’s rationality ordered the natural world as it did human communication. There is no cultural metanarrative to give life meaning, no canon of virtue to which society can appeal.

Preaching from Old Testament texts is no panacea for such a comprehen-

sive change in communication, but the Bible story does offer a metanarrative which transcends Enlightenment rationality. Hans Frei, in his analysis of the problem historical criticism posed for the church, proposed a recovery of meaning within the biblical narrative structure. The language of story creates the reality of authentic human life. The storyteller, the faith community, tells an "overarching tale," which enables believers to live out the convictions expressed in the story (Perdue, 234-240).

Before racing to storytelling as the solution to the dilemma posed by the post-modern collapse of reason, the preacher would do well to consider "The Limits of Story," as outlined by Richard Lischer (pp. 26-38). Preachers must do more than retell Bible stories. In a world of broken human beings whose stories are forgotten or fragmented, the eschatological dimension of the biblical story is needed to point beyond human history to a new reality. The tendency to allow stories to turn the hearer inward reduces the effectiveness of story to contribute to social change. With the story must come "an enunciated meaning," using abstracted images to form general principles in the consciousness of the hearers (Lischer, p. 36).

Effective post modern preaching from the O.T. will use the story of the formation of God's people as the basis for a new narrative for God's people. It will be based on the notion that "the primary task of ministry is not caring . . . [but offering] meaning" (Buttrick, 1994, p. 110). Meaning is formed in the social consciousness of the audience as the biblical story is interpreted in the context of the contemporary hearers. The post-modern audience is connected to the ancient story as both join in discussion regarding the issues they share.

POLYVALENT POST MODERN PREACHING

Post modernism is characterized by the rejection of a single, authoritative interpretation of the text. Any reading can be turned against itself by a new reader. The relationship between signs and signifiers is in constant flux, making communication dependent on a continually evolving context. The Old Testament, with its diverse voices, genres, themes, and perspectives is ideally placed to address such a world.

William Willimon has recently argued that the predominantly narrative (and virtually never propositional) character of the Bible opens the Bible to multiple interpretations and defies reductionistic readings (pp. 32-37). The "almost intentional obscurity" of the text catches the reader's attention but resists the inherently arrogant western, modern, positivistic, historicist ways of knowing. Willimon contends that the text "provokes uncertainty, dislocation, and dislodgement" against the "modern lust for unity, for a center, for coherence and cohesiveness" (p. 34).

If Willimon's perspective is useful, the biblical text appears to fit the culture particularly well. The polyvalence of the biblical text corresponds to the post modern pluralistic paradigm. Reality cannot be reduced to a single perspective. The Old Testament text incorporates various, sometimes competing, viewpoints without trying to reconcile them. Preaching invites the audience to allow the text to catch our attention as we seek to figure out this polyvalent world of text and reader. Preachers need to condition people to relish the multiplicity of messages without becoming frustrated.

Biblical scholars increasingly regard textual polyvalence as literary genius rather than the clumsy editorial bumbling identified by an earlier generation of historical critics. Robert Polzin, for instance, identifies the competing voices within the Deuteronomistic History (1980). Ecclesiastes and Job offer a reply to the simple retribution of Proverbs. Jonah and Ruth contest the particularism of Ezra-Nehemiah with universal themes.

Walter Brueggemann (1980) offers a sample sermon, "A Footnote to the Royal Pageant," which illustrates a preacher's use of textual polyvalence that does not allow the sermon to unravel into inchoate muttering. In preaching from 1 Kings 8 Brueggemann recognizes the various temple theologies of the priest, the deuteronomist, the royal house, and the disenfranchised and gives each a voice. He arranges the voices in such a way that the audience can leave with various voices ringing in their ears but without doubt about the preacher's rhetorical aim, a call for justice for those overlooked by the ceremonies and facilities of the Temple.

Polyvalent preaching addresses a world in which truth is relative. Without confronting such a perspective directly, polyvalent preaching redirects the post modern mindset. Willimon argues that truth is relative; that is, truth is directly related to the God who communicates personally with the community of faith (p. 34).

PREACHING FORMS COVENANT COMMUNITY

Enlightenment thinking was characterized by a fundamentally individualistic rationalism. From Luther's "Here I stand" and Descartes's "I think therefore I am," personal judgment was installed as a tacit authority for all things (Buttrick, 1995, p. 2). The freedom of the enlightened individual stands at the root of the personal psychological approach to preaching. Created by Harry Emerson Fosdick as a therapeutic homiletic method, developed by Norman Vincent Peale, and hawked to millions by Robert Schuller, preaching that aims at individual well-being has become common.

Fundamentalist preachers, on the other hand, have embraced and adapted Barth's biblical religion emphasis and the biblical theology movement. They have limited the Bible to personal biblical religion with point-making, Bible

lesson sermons using the third-person objective language characteristic of rationalism. This approach reduced the gospel to notions of personal salvation, ignoring the social dimension of the biblical text, and detaching it from the modern and, certainly, the post modern world (Buttrick, 1995, p. 2).

Post modernism identifies the bankruptcy of individualism. In society systems are crumbling: politics of gridlock, economies of homelessness, and educational systems without moral compass (Buttrick, 1995, pp. 2-3). In the church spirituality is reduced to a personal quest for God. Church leadership is equated with management. Individuals choose the programs that meet personal needs without recognizing a larger agenda.

Preaching from the Old Testament must address the spiritual and intellectual vacuum of individualism. It is no accident that the covenant community is central to God's design as articulated by Elmer Martens. As James Sanders described it, the formation of the Old Testament was itself the story of a people in the making. Identity as a distinct community was the goal of the law, the prophets, the narrative, and apparently at least some of the Writings.

The Old Testament story of the struggle for community speaks more powerfully to post moderns who are lost in the sea of individualism than a mythical communitarian ideal without struggle. The stories of family dysfunction among the ancestral house in Genesis and David's children and wives in 2 Samuel, of social ethical chaos in Judges, of political intrigue in Israel as documented in 1-2 Kings sound strangely contemporary. The text's refusal to whitewash heroes attracts a post modern hearing. The absence of an easy moralistic solution has an authentic ring in this world come of age.

The story is not, however, simply one of despair. Taken as a whole, the story speaks repeatedly of God's merciful offer of a new start. Even in the depths of despair, hope emerges. For a cynical, skeptical audience, the combination of realistic authenticity and hopeful anticipation suggests a powerful possibility. This story works especially for post modern minds because it shows a way through chaotic circumstances.

PREACHING FOR JUSTICE

The social changes accompanying the collapse of the modern synthesis create new opportunities for preachers who use Old Testament texts. When systems are dissolving, the chaos which follows threatens those invested in the social order with great anxiety. As the developing nations of the Third World awaken to the clout of increased economic output and population growth, western political power is in decline. Rapid change produces nostalgia for an earlier, simpler era. Across North America and Europe conservative political forces have experienced revival as voters seek reassurance in

the face of inevitable demographic shifts.

The end of white European dominance impacts not only the style but also the content of preaching. Social change challenges jingoistic patriotism, always a bad idea from the perspective of the gospel (Buttrick, 1994, p. 95). The new order invites believers to see themselves as world Christians. The collapse of the social safety net demands that the church confront growing human needs.

Nowhere is the voice of the Old Testament more helpful than in the confrontation of the escalating development of class distinctions in North America. With the richest twenty percent of Americans accumulating an ever bigger piece of the economic pie and the poorest twenty percent experiencing a decline in real income this decade, the post modern world increasingly resembles that of the Hebrew prophets. Why is it that concern for economic justice is so central to the biblical message of the O.T. and so marginalized in the post modern pulpit? How is it that Anabaptist seminaries have produced preachers who excel in confronting personal pietistic lapses without daring to address the needs of the poor? Our renewed emphasis on the reign of God must move beyond intellectual contemplation to homiletic expression. Nowhere is the Old Testament more essential and more helpful for post modern preaching than in its pervasive concern for the poor that are always with us.

Justice also demands that we recognize that the post modern world has led the church on the issue of gender equality. Again, the story of the Hebrew Bible points to greater freedom. In an overwhelmingly patriarchal world that story lauds the leadership of Rahab, Deborah, Ruth, and Esther in diverse expressions of their faith and their femininity. Other women, including Miriam, Bathsheba, and the queen of Sheba, are treated with greater brevity or ambiguity. Preaching to post moderns will be enriched by the recognition that the book of Judges records the direct correspondence between the treatment of women and the fortunes of Israel.

If it is true that post modernism is an "age of communal values and communal meanings" rather than privatistic individualism (Buttrick, 1995, p.6), we as preachers will be compelled by our world to more adequately address issues of social justice. Such concerns are central to the Old Testament message, not extracurricular fancies to be indulged in by liberal fanatics. post modernism and the Hebrew scriptures cooperate to issue a clarion call to contemporary preachers to proclaim justice.

POST MODERN PREACHING AS APOLOGETICS

Pluralism poses a problem to contemporary preachers. Reference to the authority of the Scripture draws cries of "Amen" in the hour of worship but

blank stares in the marketplace. If we are willing to admit it, we recognize that the Scriptural authority has long been held captive by the hermeneutical authority of the interpreter's rational system. The post modern shift from rationalism to include the significance of emotional affect in worship and logic again raises the question of the Archimedean point for authority. Any hermeneutic which does not include awareness of human situations to discern the times is inadequate.

Contemporary preaching from the Old Testament must be apologetic in the sense that it will move beyond the church walls into the secular language of the world. Post-modern society will lead the church into consideration of issues of justice when the church moves too slowly. Apologetic preaching will listen as well as speak. While we will explain ourselves as clearly as possible, we will also listen respectfully to other viewpoints. We may even learn from the Hebrew writers how to adapt cultural vehicles (as Israel apparently reworked Canaanite hymns by claiming for Yahweh what others had claimed for Baal) while resisting acculturation (worshiping at the altars of social norms).

Preaching from the Old Testament in the post modern world will be effective only if we adopt a new paradigm. We must return to the study of rhetoric to learn how religious meaning can form in contemporary consciousness (Buttrick, 1995, p. 7). Communal modes of thought will replace personalism for effective communicators. We will image the biblical message in new language that offers theological concepts both within and outside the garb of biblical metaphors. We will know that we have spoken for God to God's people and God's world when our listeners are liberated to experience God both personally and communally, rationally and affectively.

ENDNOTES

Brueggemann, Walter C. "The Social Nature of the Biblical Text for Preaching." In *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice*. Edited by Arthur Van Seters, p. 152-158. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988.

Buttrick, David. *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.

Buttrick, David. "Speaking Between Times: Homiletics in a Postmodern World." Unpublished paper, 1995, 3.

Craddock, Fred B. *Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.

Frei, Hans. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and*

- Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.
- Lischer, Richard. "The Limits of Story." *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 26-38.
- Perdue, Leo G. *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994. [Perdue summarizes Frei's contribution to narrative theology in pages 234-240.]
- Polzin, Robert. *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History*. New York: Seabury Press, 1980.
- Sanders, James. *Canon and Community*. Guides to Biblical Scholarship. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Willimon, William. "Postmodern Preaching: Learning to Love the Thickness of the Text." *Journal for Preachers* 19 (1996): 32-37.