Preaching From the Old Testament: a Bibliographic Essay

Elmer A. Martens

"The closing decades of the twentieth century cry for preaching that is genuinely *biblical,*" wrote Wm. D. Thompson in 1981. Such insistence is a turnabout from the catch phrase of the 1960's, "The day of preaching is over." Now publishers eagerly churn out preaching helps to meet the demand: *e.g.,* twelve slim volumes in *Abingdon Preacher's Library* series, and nine booklets in Concordia's *The Preachers Workshop Series.* Commentaries are written with the preacher in mind. Fortress Press' *Proclamation Commentary Series* of 24 slender volumes, with six for the Old Testament, carries the sub-title, "The Old Testament Witnesses for Preaching." The *Interpretation* series from John Knox Press, the first two volumes of which were released in January 1982, is subtitled, "A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching." In addition, two old Testament volumes appeared in 1981 in the series *Knox Preaching Guides.* Such an emphasis on the Bible in preaching can only be vigorously applauded in the light of Leander Keck's opening statement, "Every renewal of Christianity has been accompanied by a renewal of preaching."

This article surveys the books since 1970 that deal with preaching the Old Testament, with occasional reference to books that deal with Biblical preaching as a whole.

Judging from such books as D.M. Granskou's *Preaching from the Parables* (1972) and D. Moody Smith's *Interpreting the Gospels for Preaching* (1980), a similar article could be written about the New Testament. Creative preaching, sermon construction, and delivery are outside the scope of this article.

The most recent books, e.g., D. Gowan's *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit* (1980), already assume the impor-

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Dr. Elmer Martens, President and Professor of Old Testament at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, contributes this article as a by-product of research done during his current study leave.

tance of the Old Testament for preaching. Elizabeth Achtemeier's book earlier in the decade (1973) is largely devoted to a discussion of the necessity of the Old Testament for the Christian faith. Her reasons for the eclipse of the Old Testament include the secularization of the church generally and the aridness which resulted from Wellhausian developmentalism and its stress on the history of Israel's religion. Such a loss of the Old Testament brought about a *"Reader's Digest* religion," says Achtemeier, in which American piety was engrossed in a search for God in the world of nature and in "mystical presence" and was preoccupied with emotional and mostly individualistic "highs" in worship experiences. In contrast to such popular religion, "the Old Testament understanding of God is one in which God is always personal, always known by what he does, always actively working toward the goal of his Lordship over all men . . ." (pp. 43-44). If in evangelical circles the Old Testament has not been visible in preaching, it has not been because of Wellhausian developmentalism but because of basic failures 1) to relate adequately the two testaments, 2) to set out a well-defined exegetical procedure for Old Testaments texts, and 3) to understand how to move from the text to current relevance. Current book offerings supply help in these three areas.

From Theology to Meaning: The Two Testaments

The two testaments are related by the category of promise in Walter C. Kaiser's *Contemporary Preaching and the Old Testament.* While this professor from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School says only a little about preaching, he realizes the importance of setting a theological framework for biblical preaching. The promise doctrine, largely but not only defined as Messianism, is the theme of the Old Testament and ties the two testaments together.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, a professor of homiletics at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA, although noting secondarily the promise-fulfillment theme, emphasizes primarily that the Old Testament shows us a God who acts in history. God's world of announcement has set in motion whole series of events: e.g., God's word to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) sets in motion events through Joshua; God's word to David (II Sam. 7) dominates the remainder of the Old Testament; God's word in Christ is central for the New Testament. The two testaments are linked through a story of God's Word which issues in action.

Professor Donald Gowan of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary relates the two testaments by means of tradition history, a technical term which describes how antecedent Scriptures are used in a given text and, more important for Gowan, how that text is used in subsequent times. For him there is no need to draw a sharp line between the testaments.

The flood story, for example, is the story of chaos breaking in on an ordered world. The themes of Noah's righteousness and of world-wide rebellion are noted subsequently in Isa. 54:9 and Ezek. 14:14 and are mentioned by Jesus (Matt. 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27) and Peter (II Peter 2:4-9; I Peter 3:20-21). A sermon then emerges which depicts within us the deep-lying fears and anxieties about catastrophes and which proclaims God's reassuring word that he is in control of evil forces. For Gowan, tradition history is the key.

Foster R. McCurley, a Lutheran professor of Old Testament, specifies the relationship between the two testaments as a continuum between promise and fulfillment. In a chapter entitled "The Two Testaments," McCurley shows the discontinuities between the testaments (as does Bultmann) but then critiques him and finally lays stress on the continuity. The fulfillment of promise in the New Testament is found for McCurley in that God's will was accomplished in the person of Jesus Christ. The corresponding promise in the Old Testament is not in a single text prediction but in the overall promise of "God himself whose faithful activity with his people constantly points forward to a future coming which will be decisive not only for the people of Israel but for the world as well" (p. 37). Today's Christian also stands in the tension between promise and fulfilment, but the message of both testaments, hence the preacher's message, is that of God's faithful activity with his people.

One stops to reflect. To relate the testaments according to promise-fulfilment is to follow the New Testament's procedure. It is entirely valid, to be sure; but if the promise is alone the prediction of the Messiah, then clearly the preacher does better to live in the light of the New Testament than in the shadowy anticipations of the Old. Small wonder that evangelicals who emphasize prediction tend to bypass the Old Testament in their preaching. Jesus' message of the kingdom (Mark 1:15) and Paul's statement about Scripture (II Tim. 3:16-4:2) give much more value to the Old Testament than is encompassed by the theme of promise. McCurley offers a broader definition of promise which, though welcome, leaves the Old Testament message quite generalized.

On the other hand, it is significant that both McCurley and Achtemeier, who underscore the saving history *(Heilsgeschichte)*, fail to give examples in their books of preaching from the wisdom literature. Moreover, how to move from the fact of *Heilsgeschichte* to demand for ethical living is not at once apparent, though Achtemeier incorporates duties as a response to salvation. Gowan fares better with regard to both wisdom and ethics. He easily incorporates preaching from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as well as from the legal material of Leviticus. As for law, he adopts "the third use," namely the guidelines it offers for living in God's will. He lines up texts to show the "direction" that God moved with

regard to slavery, which beyond the New Testament would bring about its abolition. For evangelicals, however, I suspect his method is unsettling. While laws are admittedly given in specific cultural situations, is there not something more absolute to law than a directional movement? Lack of a theological framework gives to his whole book an existential open-endedness. These four books make it clear that a direction for preaching is set by the way the theological structure of the Old Testament is understood.

From the Text to Meaning: Exegesis

A second question is how to proceed exegetically in order to discern the message of a given text. Achtemeier merely alludes to the steps. McCurley is the most explicit. In the second half of his book he describes and then illustrates his seven-step method in nine historical and prophetic texts. This is the most helpful part of the book. His method, including the useful textual, literary, word study and historical context matters, emphasizes the "criticisms": form, source, redaction and tradition. He concentrates on source and redaction research and thereby seeks to show that many texts have several "levels" at which they could be preached. The story of Jacob's wrestling (Gen. 32:23-32) at the level of the Yahwistic writer shows how God blesses through personal encounter. However, on another level, in its present setting *(Sitz-im-Buch),* the story shows how God changes people. The preacher decides which of the message levels he wishes to preach.

Gowan, like Achtemeier, does not set out a step-by-step procedure. He relies most on form criticism and tradition history. A distinct contribution of his book is that he takes seriously the Old Testament forms — songs, stories, laws — and instead of asking the general question how to preach from the Old Testament, he asks rather how we are to preach from history, law, short story, saga, prophetic speech, and wisdom. On a given text the key elements are reviewed and a summary message statement for the text is formulated which is often developed into a full-blown sermon, of which there are ten examples.

Because he gives attention to the form of a text, Gowan is able to delimit a passage properly and to be sensitive to the distinctive features of a type. However (in this reviewer's opinion) he does not exploit all the exegetical possibilities. He also tends to focus on personal and social issues. More attention to word studies and to the relationship of the parts of a text to each other would yield abundant homiletical treasures. His sermons, introduced by retelling the text, illustrate his method. But they do not anchor sufficiently tightly in the biblical text; they do not examine the textual details. One feels that the sermon is a close relative of the text; the preaching is not the text itself but is *from* the text.

Persons wishing help on how to move from text to meaning might consult general books about "preaching biblically." Haddon Robinson, president and professor of Old Testament at Conservative Baptist Seminary in Denver, is reasonably detailed in his excellent *Biblical Preaching* (1980). Wm. D. Thompson, a professor at Eastern Baptist Seminary, includes in his book a carefully thought-out chapter stressing triad exegesis (literary, historical, theological). Reginald Fuller, an Episcopalian scholar, likewise devotes a chapter to the exegetical method in his sprightly book, *The Use of the Bible in Preaching* (1980). This writer heartily recommends the twelve-point method (six for pastors) described in Douglas Stuart's *Old Testament Exegesis* (1980).

From Meaning to Application

To preach from the Old Testament it is necessary to discern and cross the theological and exegetic bridges that lead from the text to its meaning. A third bridge leads from that meaning to the man and woman in the pew. How does the biblical message connect with today's hearer? Implied in this question is another: how does the preacher move from the meaning discerned in the text to the formulation of the sermon?

The answers given in recent books are similar but not identical. Kaiser, Gowan, Achtemeier and McCurley use the principle of analogy. (Achtemeier elaborates this best). Essentially, Israel's life forms an historical analogy to the life of the church, a point which she documents biblically (pp. 116-123).

"How can we legitimately jump from the 'then' of the texts to the 'now' of the congregation?" she asks. The answer "lies partly in the fact that the present day church is the historical continuation in faith of the covenant people of God." The Church is the new Israel, she contends. In a significant way "my story" is mirrored in Israel's story. For her, story is primary; she disdains the notion that a sermon can be summarized in a sentence because the Bible is not to be understood as a book of concepts but as a narrative. To emphasize the story and the analogy, she urges the pairing of an Old Testament text with a corresponding New Testament text. Thus in the sermon, "The Decision about the Jew," Gen. 12 is paired with Gal. 3:1-14. A sermon on the sign to Ahaz (Isa. 7:1-17) is paired with Luke 2:1-10.

There is much to be said in favor of the analogy principle as the bridge from the "then" to the "now." Parallels between the church and Israel are numerous. By emphasizing the story aspect, which for Achtemeier is no simple story line, one remains rooted in history and retains the Bible's style of narrative, for the Bible was not given in textbook style. Achtemeier's method succeeds in conveying the point that in the

text God is indeed addressing us. If the text passage in her sermons does not become memorable and vivid, the God behind the text does. But one also has uneasiness. The problem in telling the saving story, in Ralph Martin's words, is "how to glide from the past fact to the present duty." In the story approach, the text passage itself is not nuanced; why should exegesis then be so meticulous if its results are so little evident in the sermon? In the hands of the learned theologian the method is credible and effective. For others, the danger of reducing the story to platitudes or of exaggerating or misrepresenting story parts is real because the method offers insufficient controls. While it is good to pair an Old Testament text with one from the New Testament, this writer agrees with C. Westermann, who notes that because the God who speaks in the Old Testament is the father of Jesus Christ, the preacher "is not bound to seek constantly for the relations of ideas with the New Testament."

While Gowan also invokes the "Israel-is-my-story" paradigm, his bridge from the text to the now is frequently existential. The flood story helps me to understand myself by bringing to light my fears about a catastrophe. The stories of Daniel and Esther underline the precarious nature of existence (mine) in an alien culture. Interestingly, he holds that those Psalms which are addressed to God are not fit subjects for sermons, since these are already the human existential response.

Gowan's method assumes that the connecting point between the biblical "then" and the present day is the common denominator of humanness. Although he sees resemblances between the church and Israel, he notes, in contrast to Achtemeier, that "new Israel" is not a biblical expression. Similarly, Haddon Robinson notes that Christians cannot be directly identified with Israel. Instead, ". . . we share a common humanity . . . we can identify with their intellecutal, emotional, psychological and spiritual reactions to God and their fellow man" (p. 94). Kaiser writes, "Do you see how it's really the same today as it was then? We are the same type of people. He is the same God!" (p. 108) Achtemeier's response, quite aside from whether humans have changed over the millennia, warns about the moralistic nature into which sermons then slide. "Proposition and moralist sermons both have one fault in common: They fail to allow us to experience those actions for ourselves" (p. 46).

People who are in Israel's faith succession are entitled to identify with Israel. True. But surely "humanness" is a valid common denominator, though admittedly not an exclusive one. Certain texts, such as wisdom texts, do make their link with us on the basis of a common humanity. For other texts, the parallel between an ancient and contemporary people of God is the bridge that will serve.

As to the closely related subquestion how to move from text mean-

ing to sermon outline while incorporating the relevance of the message, only limited help is found in Achtemeier, McCurley is more helpful,though he moves only up to the sermon sentence. More help still, though not adequate, comes from Gowan, who singles out motifs in the text and converses with the reader about the thinking that goes into shaping the sermon. Greater help by far is to be found in Robinson's chapter, "The Road from Text to Sermon." Thompson devotes an elaborate chapter to a dyadic approach in which one notes the polarized movement from human need to God's action, from God's action to human response, and finally from the then to the now. For a quite different schema Ernest Best is interesting.

Special attention is due Walter Kaiser's recent book on *Exegetical Theology,* which seeks to remedy the "gap that exists between the study of the biblical text . . . and the actual delivery of messages to God's people." He propounds the "syntactical-theological" method of exegesis, which moves beyond the grammatical-historical method by paying more attention to syntactical matters (theme proposition, intra and inter-paragraph relationships) and biblical theology (investigating the antecedent theology which informs the text). Both "moves" can be basically affirmed. Kaiser proposes "principlizing" the text, a "procedure . . . to discover the enduring ethical, spiritual, doctrinal and moral truths or principles" as a way of building the bridge between the "then" and the "now." Three chapters apply this method homiletically to Old Testament prophesy, narrative and poetry. While "principlizing the text" is in danger of rendering a text static, when the predominant message of the Old Testament is of a dynamic God, Kaiser's book is nevertheless a welcome help on how to move from text to sermon. Preachers, even those who are good exegetes, often flounder at this stage.

A Summary Statement

Now to summarize the four main books on preaching from the Old Testament. Kaiser, whose book title is a misnomer, gives content summaries of the law, history, prophets — the genres are similar to Gowan's — and shows how the Christian can utilize each. Like Achtemeier, Kaiser seeks to establish the relevance of the Old Testament to the Christian. His book is recommended for its evangelical content and overall framework. The book has no sample sermons and is only indirectly about preaching. Achtemeier expands the close story link between the Old Testaments and between the Bible and today's Christian. She stresses the theological framework without much attention to the mechanical "how to's." McCurley's strength is in stating and amply illustrating the step-by-step process that leads up to the sermon idea, although his attention to levels of text formation, while ingenious, will not help those with other presuppositions. Gowan is most helpful in

presenting the variety of literary forms and how each demands different sermon possibilities. The key of tradition history sets a direction for the sermon idea, treats the Bible holistically, and arches quite naturally toward the current situation. His sermon examples, while illustrating his method, are "fair," though too much given to a description of the human situation. Of the three, Achtemeier will give the current preacher the greatest stimulus for sermon ideas; McCurley could be of help to those at sea on technique, though Robinson and Stuart will serve much better; and Gowan would be of help to those already preaching from the Old Testament but desiring refinement of a method and approach.

A Final Comment: Preaching Biblically

Comment should be made, even if brief, on what it means to be biblical in preaching. The question about biblical preaching is not anymore concerned with differentiating between various textual or expository methods of reading the Bible. Keck's definition is standard, perhaps: "Preaching is truly biblical when a) the Bible governs the content of the sermon and when b) the function of the sermon is analogous to that of the text" (p. 106). James A. Sanders speaks of biblical preching as "scoring as closely as possible for the modern hearer the point or points scored originally by the biblical authors" (p.5). Similar definitions may be found in Neil Wiseman's book. But we can see that these definitions are understood in radically different ways when we compare Robinson and Achtemeier. Robinson defines preaching as the communication of biblical concepts (p. 20); Achtemeier stresses that the Bible is essentially story. In the first, attention is given to detail, to word studies, to correct formulations. In the second, while some exegetical details are included, the emphasis is on the overall story and particularly on God who is the chief actor. How is one to understand the Bible? Is it a book of concepts? Is it story? Does the truth lie somewhere in between? The sermon form and perhaps even the sermon message are largely determined by the answer we give.

In comparing recent books on preaching from the Old Testament with books from former decades, one notes some interesting developments. Contemporary writers are biblical scholars; earlier writers were often homiletics professors (e.g., Blackwood, Whitesell). Present-day biblical scholars are forthright in stating that their work is to assist the church, and therefore they take up the mandate to work on preaching. More attention is thus given in recent books to exegetical methodology, in contrast to L. Toombs, for example, who concentrates on presenting highlights of Old Testament content. Contemporary books include full-blown sample sermons rather than suggestive outlines. Several provide bibliographical helps for preachers (e.g.,

Robinson, Fuller). Much of the recent literature is occupied with the questio of how to deal with the "criticism" which, as Keck admits, accounts for some of the malaise in biblical preaching, but which scholars (McCurley, Gowan, Fuller, Keck) believe offer help for the preacher.

Although most of the books noted above adopt critical positions on the Old Testament, they nevertheless can teach us much about both the content of the Old Testament and about preaching from it. These books are bridging the gap, to which James Smart referred in 1970, between the departments of Bible and homiletics. Evangelicals have good rason to be updated and also to contribute to the discussion. Professor J.D.W. Watt, now of Southwestern Baptist Seminary, has stated, "The very groups that are working so hard to gain adherence to a statement of inerrancy are not doing a good job of using the Scripture effectively in preaching or in teaching."

Since the Old Testament is the Word of God, since Christ and the apostles preached from it, since the New Testament is truncated without it, and since Christians are impoverished in their understanding of God without the Old Testament, preachers have every reason to give themselves with diligence to continued study on how to preach from the Old Testament. Its message about God, his word and work, is needed by the church and by an unbelieving world.

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