

PREACHING FROM THE PENTATEUCH

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S. Greidanus laments the fact that the vast majority of Christian preachers seldom if ever base their sermons on any of the material found in the OT. He writes: "Statistics are hard to come by, but from reports of several denominations it is safe to conclude that fewer than 20 percent of the sermons the average church member hears are based on an Old Testament text. This figure is all the more telling when we remember that the Old Testament constitutes about three-fourths of the Christian canon" (Greidanus, 15). A similar point is made by M. Duidit, editor of *Preaching* magazine, who observes, "I annually receive hundreds of sermon manuscripts from ministers in a variety of Protestant denominations. Less than one-tenth of the sermons submitted to *Preaching* are based on Old Testament texts" (Duidit, 9).

Is this absence of OT preaching based on the belief that the OT is not authoritative for Christians? Is the OT the story of the people of Israel with no relevance or importance to the followers of Jesus Christ? Perhaps Christian preachers avoid the OT, or at least the vast majority of it, because they do not know what to do with the customs and culture of that ancient society. What is a Christian to do with animal *sacrifice, male *circumcision and dietary codes that exclude shrimp and pork? What use can a Christian preacher make of religious *festivals based on an agricultural cycle that has no relevance for modern industrial society? Most troubling for many is belief in a God who is known as a holy warrior and who orders the wholesale slaughter of thousands of people who are guilty of nothing more than not being members of the Hebrew nation. For many Christian preachers, the wisest course of action seems to be to avoid the OT altogether.

E. Achtemeier suggests that the OT fell out of favor among Christian preachers as early as the eighteenth century and the age of rationalism.

The basis for dismissing it was the widely held view that the content of the OT was the description of what was viewed as a "primitive religion" (Achtemeier 1973, 28). She also states: "The Old Testament was considered to be simply the history of the first stages in man's spiritual evolution, whose lower ideas of God and faith had subsequently been superseded by the higher spiritual truths of Christianity. The Old Testament had no revelatory value in itself. It was simply the historical preparation for the New Testament" (Achtemeier 1973, 30).

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1. The Necessity of Preaching from the Old Testament.

What must be understood, however, is that it is essential that Christian preachers make regular use of the OT if they are to fulfill the challenge of Paul, who said, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27). There are several compelling reasons why preaching from the OT is essential for Christians. First and most important, it is impossible to understand the ministry of Jesus and Paul or the theology of the NT without having a deep and reverent understanding of the OT in general and the Pentateuch in particular. The OT is a part of the Christian canon. Its thirty-nine books are an inseparable and invaluable portion of the church's authoritative text. The second reason the OT must be read, preached from and learned from is that it is the material that served as Holy Scripture for Jesus, the apostles and the NT church. Before the Epistles and Gospels had been written, the writings that we call the OT provided the theological concepts and vocabulary, the historical framework and the religious rituals and practices without which the ministry and teachings of Jesus cannot be understood.

1.1. The Old Testament as the Theological Foundation of Christianity. If someone were somehow determined never to preach from the OT, this person would be unable to make much sense of preferred NT texts, because so much of the NT is dependent on the OT for its language, theology and historical perspective. How does one understand the incarnation of Jesus or the mission of the church in the world without first understanding the central concept of a God who works in and through history to create a people who will live in obedience to his revealed will? How does one understand the concept of the church described in I Peter 2:9 as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" without referring back to the OT concept of Israel as the chosen people of God first mentioned in Exodus 19:6?

1.2. The Old Testament as the Bible for Jesus and the Early Church. How many times does Jesus quote from the OT? This fact alone forces anyone who seeks to preach from one of those texts to go back to that passage to grasp more fully what Jesus is now saying about himself, some doctrinal issue or some controversial question put to him by his critics. For example, in Luke 4:16-21 Jesus returns to his boyhood home of Nazareth, enters the synagogue and reads from the Isaiah scroll. He then says that the passages in Isaiah 61 pertaining to the *Messiah have been fulfilled. Not only must preachers go back and study the Isaiah passage, but they must also come to some informed understanding of the meaning of Messiah, the Spirit of the Lord and the year of Jubilee.

Later in that same passage, Jesus speaks of the love of God extending to Naaman the Syrian in the days of Elisha and to a woman of Sidon in the days of Elijah. Strangely, those comments draw a more hostile response from those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth than

does the idea that comments about the Messiah are being fulfilled in the life and ministry of the man before them. This inevitably forces the preacher back to the relevant passages in 2 Kings. More important, it begs the question of Jewish nationalism tied to the concept of the chosen people that made it difficult for them to imagine the love of God extending beyond themselves, least of all to the hated and despised Syrians and Phoenicians. Thus, this critical passage about the identity of Jesus as the fulfillment of messianic promises cannot be grasped without going back to its OT roots.

Jesus repeatedly refers to such OT characters as *Abraham, *Isaac, *Jacob, *Moses, Jonah, David, Daniel, *Noah, Isaiah, Solomon, Elijah and many more. He refers to such OT events as the *flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the persecution of the prophets. He also draws heavily from OT images and language during the week prior to his death. The Palm Sunday procession is best understood over against Zechariah 9. When he cleanses the temple, casting out those who exchanged money and sold birds and animals that were to be used as acts of atonement, he references Isaiah 56:7. The Lord's Supper is developed out of the context of the observance of a Passover meal. And during his crucifixion Jesus utters a groan in the words of Psalm 22. In short, it is impossible to understand much, if anything at all, about the life and ministry of Jesus without conceding the importance he placed on the OT. If it was important to his self-understanding, we must turn regularly to that material when we plan our preaching.

Jesus made great use of materials from the Pentateuch when he engaged in a conversation with a scribe in Mark 12. When asked which was the greatest of the commandments, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. When Jesus was tempted by the devil after spending forty days in the wilderness (Mt 4), he rebuked Satan three times by referring to passages found in Deuteronomy 6; 8. He referred to levitical laws dealing with *holiness (Lev 9:2), retribution (Lev 24:19-20) and swearing oaths in the name of God (Lev 19:12). Jesus made reference to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which are discussed in the book of Genesis. In Luke 10:25, when an expert in Jewish law asked him what one needs to do to inherit eternal life, the first thing Jesus did was refer him to what is written in the *law of Moses. These are but a few instances of the crucial and irreplaceable legacy that flows from the OT to the NT. There is no way to preach about Jesus Christ without a full and complete understanding of OT terms, times, topography and theology.

2. Preaching from the Pentateuch.

So far as the Pentateuch is concerned, there is much that can profitably be examined in sermons. This is where the heart and soul of the debate surrounding creationism versus evolution is located. In fact, one theory need not exist to the exclusion of the other, so far as the Pentateuch is concerned. From a creationist's perspective, Genesis clearly suggests that creation was willed into existence by the spoken words of God: "Let there be ..." From the perspective of those who argue for evolution, the biblical text is equally helpful because it

places God at the center of that creative process. No matter how many millions of years old the earth may be, evolution only describes how life emerged upward out of some primordial mystery. What evolution does not do, but what the Pentateuch clearly does, is account for the first essential spark of life from which human life evolved. The answer is plainly stated: "In the beginning, God ..." No matter which side of the argument one lines up with, the Pentateuch places God at the center of the transaction. A nineteenth-century African American spiritual comes to mind when one considers God as the agent of creation: "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."

Several other preaching possibilities emerge from a review of the creation stories in Genesis 1; 2. The first of them concerns the role and status of *women in the community of faith. What shall we make of the phrase "Male and female he created them"? There is no sense of female subordination in this passage. There is no implication that women should not aspire for leadership within the community of faith solely because of their gender. Israel was a patriarchal society, yet the creation of humanity as male and female opens the door to some helpful and long overdue consideration of what the Bible teaches and reflects concerning the role of women in ancient Israel. One can also consider the implications of these for the contemporary church as we seek to resolve the still controversial issue of women in ministry and other leadership positions in the church.

No issue is more debated these days than the institution of marriage, and the understanding of marriage that is most commonly held by contemporary Christians is largely rooted in the Pentateuch. Consider the challenge to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). Then consider the observation that for this reason "a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). When one begins with this image of marriage in mind, it is easier to respond to those who advocate for everything from polygamy to same-sex marriage to premarital sex and teen pregnancy. Issues that perplex us in the twenty first century may have their solutions in the plain wisdom of Israel. The preacher must address these contemporary concerns, and the material found in the Pentateuch can be of immense help in providing a theological frame work within which to speak.

Much of the environmentalist movement is rooted in the Pentateuch's claim that human kind was designated the task of being stewards of the earth. How should we approach the controversial issues of air and water pollution, solid waste disposal, the handling and encasing of toxic nuclear materials, urban sprawl and the loss of green space, urban redevelopment and the reclamation of brown fields? Taking a careful look at the commandment to "subdue [the earth] and have dominion" (Gen 1:28) is a good place to start. Does having dominion over the earth extend to expanding our usable spaces at the expense of other species? These questions, rooted in the Pentateuch, are timely subjects for contemporary preaching.

3. Principles for Christian Preaching from the Old Testament.

From the third to the sixteenth centuries, much Christian preaching from the OT employed one of two standard methods of interpretation or hermeneutics. They were known as allegory and typology. In allegory, every word, character or image in the OT is read as if it actually represents something else of NT relevance. Nothing in the OT means what was written in literal terms. The classic use of allegory involves the story of Rahab the harlot (Josh 2:17-20). Rahab is told to hang a scarlet cord in her window so the advancing Israelite army will know not to destroy that house as they begin their conquest of the city of Jericho. That story was interpreted to suggest that the red cord was a symbol for the blood of Christ and that salvation was possible only for those who sought refuge in him.

Typology was a method that suggested that things mentioned in the OT were types or models of things that would later appear in the NT. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, is viewed as an early expression of the sacrifice that God was willing to make when he allowed his only Son to be sacrificed on Calvary. Typology as a way of interpreting an OT text occurs when an OT event is viewed as a prelude to or an earlier example of something that reaches a fuller expression in the NT. Unlike allegory, where the OT text's literal meaning has no value, with typology the historical relevance of the OT text is preserved. However, in many instances the events of the OT are seen as a foreshadowing of things that would appear in the NT. H. W. Wolff writes: "Typology is intended not to suspend historical-critical work, but to support it in a relevant manner.

The question of exposition remains firmly directed toward the meaning of the text that the authors had in mind in their time. The concern is that the meaning may be missed through the neglect of the New Testament context" (Wolff, 182). In addition to typology, several more recent hermeneutical principles can assist Christian preachers in their attempts to preach from the OT.

3.1. Continuity and Discontinuity. The first hermeneutical principle concerns continuity and discontinuity. That is to say, as a result of the Christ-event, some aspects of OT theology are no longer instructive or authoritative for Christians, while some things taught and believed by OT Israel remain relevant and binding on the contemporary Christian church. Christian preachers must learn to navigate this issue if they are to make use of the OT.

3.1.1. Discontinuity. The principle of discontinuity must be our point of departure when discussing how to preach from the OT because it makes us sensitive to the way that Jesus has altered the meaning of certain things, such as when he transformed the Passover meal into the Lord's Supper or when he repeatedly stated, "You have heard that it has been said.... but now I say to you..." (Mt 5). It involves such subtle shifts as moving the day of worship from the Jewish *sabbath (sundown Friday to sundown Saturday), in honor of creation, to the "Lord's Day" (Sunday), in honor of the resurrection. It involves more radical and self-defining practices such as shifting from circumcision and obedience to Mosaic law to *grace as the assurance of membership in the family of

God. This is the meaning of discontinuity. Terms, practices and beliefs that were valid for the believing community of the OT no longer have that same claim on the followers of Jesus Christ. This would include such things as the temple rituals revolving around a sacrificial system or nationalist claims revolving around a king of the seed of David sitting on a throne in Jerusalem. In fact, the very centrality of Jerusalem itself becomes a matter of discontinuity.

The words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17 fit in this discussion: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" From the point of view of preaching from the OT, the preacher needs to recognize what aspects of OT faith and doctrine "have passed away" so far as the NT church and the subsequent followers of Christ are concerned. Discontinuity is like a line in the sand of time across which some things do not pass at all and across which other things pass but only after having been drastically redefined. It is discontinuity that is being signaled in John 1:17, which says, "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

It is discontinuity that is being signaled when Paul, speaking of giving up his Jewish faith for the sake of Christ, says, "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil 3:3-9). It is discontinuity that is being signaled when the Jerusalem Council determines that obligations that some viewed as still binding on Jews who converted to Christianity would not be imposed on Gentile converts (Acts 15). And it is discontinuity that is being signaled when Paul casts aside the social and cultural prejudices of ancient Israel and declares, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

3.1.2. Continuity. When preaching from the OT, one must be careful to inquire whether an aspect of doctrine or religious ritual has authority that passes over into NT faith and practice, or has been dramatically eclipsed or substantially reinterpreted in light of the Christ-event. Continuity and discontinuity converge in some interesting ways around certain concepts. For instance, animal sacrifice on an annual basis as a way of atoning for sin is no longer binding on Christians, a clear instance of discontinuity. We are no longer obligated to honor that part of OT faith and teaching. On the other hand, continuity also appears at this point. The concept of needing atonement for sin continues in the NT, but now that atonement is accomplished through faith in the death of Jesus Christ who is for us "the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:36).

Continuity and discontinuity do not always mean the complete elimination of certain terms and concepts from Christian theology. In many instances those concepts have been significantly altered and redefined from their original OT intent to the new ways in which they are applied and interpreted in the NT. Nearly the entire book of Hebrews is a demonstration of this very principle at work. Its repeated references to the high priest, the tabernacle, the sacrificial system and more are clear reminders of the weight and authority once given to

practices and beliefs contained in the OT. Those practices and beliefs are not abandoned as a result of the Christevent. Rather, they are reinterpreted in such a way as to point out how the ministry of Christ is best viewed as an outgrowth, if not a continuation, of that OT legacy.

3.2. Liberation Theology. In many contemporary communities of faith, liberation theology has become another lens through which the OT can be used in preaching. What God did at the Red Sea, while the Israelites crossed the Sinai Desert, in the lions' den or in the fiery furnace in Babylon was on behalf of those who were victims of oppression. The God of Israel is not only a jealous God who says, "You shall have no other gods before me." The God of the OT is also a God of justice who says to Pharaoh through Moses, "Let my people go."

Does that mean that God's power as liberator is limited only to those who were members of the community of biblical Israel? Certainly the African slaves of the American South in the nineteenth century did not think so. They regularly appropriated the liberation stories of the OT and reinterpreted them, without benefit of any formal theological training, to serve their spiritual needs. As a result, their songs and sermons were replete with references to "Go Down Moses, Way Down in Egypt's Land" or "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel, and Why Not Every Man"? They took the words of Jeremiah 8:22 "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"-and turned that question mark into an exclamation point and sang instead, "There is a balm in Gilead that makes the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead that heals the sin-sick soul." The religion of those slaves is a reminder that another key to preaching from the OT is the use of the motifs of liberation. God takes the side of the oppressed. God comes to the aid of those who are victims of injustice. Moreover, as part of God's *covenant community, Israel and the church are challenged to extend justice to the neediest in society, especially the stranger who dwells in the land, "for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Ex 23:9).

Of course, the careful preacher will present the entire story. There has been a historic weakness attached to most liberation-theology arguments of the last thirty years. That weakness has been the disconnect between the exodus story and the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, on the one hand, and the clear command to Moses to bring the people to Mount Sinai, on the other hand, where they were transformed from slaves into a covenant community guided by the Ten Commandments (see Decalogue). God did not simply release Israel from bondage under Pharaoh. God did not merely identify with the oppressed. God also called those newly liberated people into a new relationship of accountability to God and to one another.

Christian preachers using the OT can provide a needed corrective to this glaring absence of theological accountability. God did not simply lead Israel out of Egypt, bearing them "on eagles' wings" (Ex 19:4). God also said, "Therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Ex 19:5). Indeed, it was because Israel did not keep that covenant that they were returned to captivity in 586 B.C. when Babylon conquered their nation, sacked Jerusalem, knocked down their temple

and sent many of the people into exile. Not only does God demand justice from those in power who oppress us, but God demands justice from us as well.

3.3. Promise and Fulfillment. A third motif that can serve as a guide to preaching from the OT is the notion of *promise and fulfillment. Preaching from the Pentateuch allows for an encouraging description of a God who keeps promises no matter how hopeless circumstances may appear and no matter how sinful people may be. God made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob concerning offspring as numerous as the sands of the sea and the stars in the sky, yet the wives of these men-Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel were all barren. How could God keep that promise in the face of that hopeless situation? By the same token, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were regularly disobedient, and unfaithful Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel all tried to help God accomplish what they were sure God could not do alone. Despite the impossibility of their circumstances and the sinfulness of their lives, God still kept faith with them and fulfilled the promises made to them.

This depiction of the faithfulness of God despite the unfaithfulness of Israel runs throughout the rest of the Pentateuch as well, especially as the exodus story is recounted. Despite the murmuring in the *wilderness, the rebellion involving the *golden calf and the faithlessness of those spies who doubted that the Promised *Land could be conquered, God kept faith with the people. Along with God's faithfulness despite human sinfulness is God's ability to accomplish the divine purpose despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This can also be seen throughout the exodus story. Whether it involved working through the hard heart of Pharaoh, allowing Israel to pass through the Red Sea as on dry ground or feeding the people with *manna and quail during the trip across the desert, God made a way out of no way. It should be possible for creative preachers to make great use of these two themes. A song by Thomas A. Dorsey captures the spirit of OT promise- and fulfillment texts: "The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow!"

The question of promise and fulfillment becomes trickier when assumptions about the Promised Land are concerned. Preaching from the Pentateuch forces the preacher to consider Israel's claims to nationhood as well as the Mosaic versus the royal covenants that undergird that claim. Is Israel's claim to the Promised Land valid and binding on God no matter how Israel behaves? That is the view of those who believe that God gave the land of Canaan to the people of Israel as an inheritance forever. That is the essence of the royal covenant and the basic claim of contemporary Zionists who use that idea to justify the existence of the modern state of Israel. Meanwhile, the Mosaic covenant links Israel's continued ability to remain in the Promised Land to their obedience to the commandments of God. Occupancy of the land of Israel was not an automatic birthright; it was a gift of grace by God to a faithful people.

Having a clear view on this question is useful for contemporary preachers, especially in light of the current dispute about which group has the most authentic claim to the land of Palestine. What are the rights of the Palestinians who were displaced from that land in 1948?

Is the present-day Jewish state of Israel, comprised largely of secular Jews who do not practice Judaism, the actual continuation of OT Israel? Should Jerusalem be the capital city for a Jewish or a Palestinian state? These explosive issues, and others, can better be discussed by those preachers who acquaint themselves with the material found in the Pentateuch and throughout the OT.

There is another side to this issue of Israel's claim to nationhood. That is the fact that in the Pentateuch Israel has not yet conquered the Promised Land. In fact, as the Pentateuch ends Israel has still not crossed over into Canaan. The central document of ancient Israel—the Torah, the Pentateuch—did not record Israel living a secure life in the Promised Land. It is this issue that has caused some to argue for a Hexateuch (six books), which would include Joshua and the conquest of the Promised Land as part of its core canon. The question that the debate over the Hexateuch seeks to resolve is whether one has to live in the land of Israel in order to belong to the people of God. Making use of the promise-and-fulfillment motif allows the preacher to conclude that being the people of God is a spiritual, and not a geographical, issue. One can serve God from any location, as Israel had to do after 586 B.C. There is immense value for Christians in the notion that communion with God can be sustained no matter where we are physically located.

3.4. Salvation History. Beginning in the Pentateuch and running throughout the OT is another hermeneutical approach to preaching, namely, salvation history. It begins when God calls Abraham to walk by faith, and it culminates in the faith that believers place in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The notion of God working through individuals and events (even evil deeds and wicked schemes) to bring about the redemption of his people is a centerpiece of the OT that leads directly to Christ and the cross. Along the way one encounters such themes as the suffering servant, vicarious suffering and substitutionary atonement.

One way to read the OT is to focus on Genesis 1:31. The created order has come into existence with humankind challenged to be good stewards of creation. God looks upon the whole of creation and declares it to be very good! One could argue that what God is seeking to accomplish in salvation history is to return the whole of creation to the place where God can look at it, both in terms of the environment and in terms of human relationships with God and with each other, and once again say, "It is very good."

As Christians, we believe that the salvation history work of God took a decisive turn in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The work God began with OT Israel was finally accomplished through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Moreover, that salvation history is continued today through the preaching of the church and the message that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). However, as was stated at the outset, the Christ-event cannot be viewed as an isolated event. It is an integral part of the story that begins in the OT.

See also HERMENEUTICS.

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M. A. McMickle

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