

Reflections on Preaching Christ from the Old Testament

SIDNEY GREIDANUS

Sidney Greidanus taught for many years at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. He also taught at The King's College. He earned his PhD from the Free University of Amsterdam. Since his retirement from full-time teaching in 2004, he has devoted his time to writing commentaries specifically for preachers. He is the author of many books, including *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Eerdmans, 1989); *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1999); *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Wipf & Stock, 2001); *Preaching Christ from the Psalms* (Eerdmans, 2016); and *From Chaos to Cosmos: Creation to New Creation* (Crossway, 2018).

These three authors each approach the topic of “Preaching Christ, the Text, or Something Else?” in their own way, using Genesis 15:1-6 as a test case. I will comment briefly on each article, provide a definition of “Preaching Christ,” suggest seven legitimate ways to move from the Old Testament (OT) preaching text to Jesus Christ in the New Testament (NT), and analyze Genesis 15:1-6 for sermon preparation.

COMMENTS ON EACH ARTICLE

I appreciated Daniel Block's redemptive-historical perspective of Scripture. He writes, “The Bible (First and New Testaments) tells a single story of God's gracious plan of redeeming the cosmos from sin and the effects of the rebellion of those created as his images and commissioned to govern the world on his behalf. That story climaxes in Jesus, whose work is accomplished in two identifiable phases: first, in the incarnation 2000

years ago, when through his death he dealt sin and all the forces of evil a mortal blow, and through the power of his resurrection was exalted as the Son of God. And now we wait for phase 2, when he will return and recreate the heavens and the earth in all their original and this time irrevocable perfection and glory. This is the story.” This statement should be framed and placed on every preacher’s desk. Block continues, “Not every text of Scripture points to Jesus Christ as Messiah, but every text presents a vital part of that story of Jesus, ‘who is also called the Christ.’ We may often grasp the Christological significance of a First Testament text only with hindsight” (p. 14). Hindsight is certainly true with the ways of redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, and typology which I explain below.

I also appreciated Block’s “Discourse/Syntactic Diagram of Genesis 15:1-6” (p. 19) which, without using the narrative headings I use, comes close to the plot line which captures the conflict, rising tension, the turn in the narrative, resolution, and outcome (see my plot line below). We might note in passing that Block’s “Theme: Abram’s Struggle with Childlessness” is technically, homiletically, not a theme but a title. Block’s “theme” identifies the subject; to get to the real theme we must answer the question: What does the author say about this subject? In other words, a theme formulates the message of the text in a single sentence, subject and predicate, such as I propose below: “The LORD promises childless Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens.”

Unfortunately, Block does not seem to like the term “Christocentric” or “Christ-centered” and sets up a straw man to fight it. He writes, “Many Christocentric sermons I have heard are anything but expository. The problem with a Christocentric hermeneutic surfaces early in the history of the church” (p. 17). Then follow examples of allegorizing and antisemitism. It is true that allegorical interpretation has been used in church history to seek to preach Christ, but that does not mean that one can equate allegorical interpretation with “a Christocentric hermeneutic.” Christocentric interpretation is radically different from allegorical interpretation.¹ As far as I know, all published contemporary scholars who promote Christocentric interpretation and preaching reject allegorical interpretation.

Block sees another problem with “a Christocentric reading of OT narratives” and instead opts for “a Christo-telic reading of First Testament

narratives.” He writes, “Based on a particular reading of Jesus’ comments to the Emmaus disciples in Luke 24:27 and 44, the Christocentric hermeneutic assumes that all the Scriptures (i.e., every text) speak of him” (p. 12). Who are these Christocentric preachers who assume that “*every text*” speaks of Christ? The Christocentric method insists that every preaching text be a literary unit, not a fragment or a single text. If I understand Block correctly, I think we are dealing here with another assumption that a Christocentric reading of OT narratives necessarily “assumes that all the Scriptures (i.e., every text) speak of him [Jesus Christ]” (p. 12). I have no difficulty with a “Christo-telic” reading (except that many people will not understand it), but see no reason to have it replace the time-honored phrase “Christocentric interpretation” and “Christocentric preaching.”

Instead of “Christ-centered preaching,” Block argues for “Jesus-centered preaching.” He writes, “Jesus is a personal name, in contrast to Christ (ὁ χριστός), which is a title. By definition, a name invites a personal relationship, as opposed to an official epithet, which acknowledges a formal relationship based on status” (p. 8). But this is just a theoretical distinction which does not hold up in practice. When I think of preaching Christ I am not thinking of preaching an office but preaching the *person* who holds the office of Messiah, who is none other than Jesus Christ. Since Jesus is the Christ and Christ is Jesus, I think “Jesus-centered” and “Christ-centered” can be used interchangeably.

I like Vern Poythress’s emphasis on theocentric interpretation because that is where Christocentric interpretation should start. But instead of Christ-centered interpretation he argues for Trinity-centered interpretation. Poythress writes, “Christ-centered interpretation and Trinity-centered interpretation should be seen as two sides of the same coin” (p. 51). And again, “Rightly understood, Christocentric preaching is also necessarily Trinity-centered preaching. Conversely, Trinity-centered preaching is Christ-centered” (p. 52). But saying so, doesn’t make it so. Poythress has added the Holy Spirit to the equation. It is difficult enough to preach Christ from the OT without adding the Holy Spirit as another objective. And how should we understand Trinity-centered preaching? Should we strive to give more or less equal time to each person of the Trinity in every sermon on every text as some have suggested?² That would place an impossible burden on preachers, for it places them in a straitjacket

that is bound to distort the text. But in his “exposition” of Genesis 15:1-6, I don’t see Poythress moving in that direction except for mentioning “trinitarian” a few times. So what does he mean by “Trinity-centered preaching”?

I suggest that the content of the sermon should be dictated *not* by systematic theology but by the content of the preaching text. Sometimes that content is indeed the Holy Spirit, in which case the sermon will be Holy Spirit-centered. But most often the sermon will be centered on God the Father and the Son. For in the Scriptures the Holy Spirit serves to exalt not himself but the Father and the Son. Jesus said about “the Spirit of truth,” “He will glorify *me*, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that *the Father* has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14-15).³ And Paul does not say, “We proclaim Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” but “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24). Preaching “*Christ crucified*” is preaching “the power of *God* and the wisdom of *God*.”

I also question Poythress’s defense of expository preaching from a single verse. He writes,

Often expository preaching is considered more narrowly. It often means focusing on expounding one verse or one passage from the Bible ... We may indeed affirm that it is a tradition with wisdom and it can serve to instruct aspiring preachers. The principal people who advocate expository preaching do not themselves claim that single-text preaching is absolutely the only way to preach—only that it is generally preferable. In particular, they offer it as wise counsel for young men who are still gaining their feet with the practice of preaching. With that understanding we may agree (p. 54).

I think it is irresponsible to teach “aspiring preachers” to expound on a single verse because it opens the way to misinterpreting the biblical author’s message and replacing it with one’s own. Thus it may derail the sermon’s message from the start. Biblical authors did not communicate in single verses, of course,⁴ but in literary units, often marked with ancient rhetorical structures such as repetition, inclusio, and chiasm. Only a biblical literary unit makes for a good preaching text.⁵ Perry Yoder rightly argued, “In the

study of the Bible we need to begin with the assumption that the Bible writers were attempting to communicate to their audience by writing in organized units. These compositional units or paragraphs are the smallest unit of communication in the text ... To take less than this is to chop up the ideas of the author and perhaps misunderstand them as a result of studying them out of context.”⁶

Elliott Johnson’s “Expository Preaching and Christo-Promise” shows good awareness of progression in redemptive-history and the way of promise-fulfillment. At first I thought that he might have limited himself to “Christo-promise” with God’s promise of Genesis 15:1-6 in mind. But then he concludes,

The title *Christo-Promise* seeks to represent the *intention-directed revelation* of the OT. *Promise*, having the force of a prophetic-future, speaks to God’s intent to restore and bless the fallen creation. That restoration includes both the restoration of mankind’s relationship to God and the restoration of mankind’s mediating role of rule in God’s will in the creation. It is God’s stated commitment in promise that certifies the believer’s hope. *Christo* speaks to the ultimate One through whom fulfillment of the promise would appear (p. 44).

This is a fine description of the way of promise-fulfillment. But Johnson appears to miss several other legitimate ways to move from an OT passage to Jesus Christ in the NT (see below).

DEFINITION OF “PREACHING CHRIST”

It would be well if we all started with the same definition of preaching Christ from the OT. Some twenty years ago I proposed the following definition which, according to reviews, was well-received: Preaching Christ is “preaching sermons which authentically integrate the message of the text with the climax of God’s revelation in the person, work, and/or teaching of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament.”⁷

This definition highlights that preaching Christ from the OT involves basically a two-step hermeneutical process. The first question that needs to be answered is: In this passage, what was the author’s message for Israel? This question focuses on the OT context. This first step should lead to

the formulation of the *textual* theme (the author's message for Israel) and goal (the author's purpose or reason for sending this message). Second, What is God's message in this passage for the church today? This question expands the OT context to the NT. Here we look for ways in which we can legitimately move from the message of the preaching text to Jesus Christ as revealed in the NT. This second step should lead to the formulation of the *sermon* theme and the preacher's goal in preaching this sermon.

But how do we move from the message of the OT to Jesus Christ in the NT? Charles Spurgeon's graphic illustration sort of stuck in my mind when he instructed a young preacher: "Don't you know, young man, that from every town and every village and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? So from every text of Scripture there is a road to Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, now what is the road to Christ? I have never found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if ever I do find one, I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savor of Christ in it."⁸ Unfortunately, Spurgeon often left the road to Christ by going over "hedge and ditch," and getting trapped in the swamp of allegorizing, typologizing, generalizing, and moralizing.⁹ Not all roads to Christ are legitimate. But he was right that there are indeed major roads that run from the OT to Christ in the NT.

LEGITIMATE ROADS TO CHRIST

In *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* I identified seven major roads the NT and the church used to move legitimately from an OT text to Christ in the NT. These seven ways are: redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, NT references, and contrast. I will briefly explain these seven, sometimes overlapping, ways.¹⁰

1. *Redemptive-historical progression is the most basic, foundational way.* It acknowledges that after the fall into sin, God's redemptive work progressed through history from the *protevangelium* of Genesis 3:15 ("he [the seed of the woman] will strike your [the serpent's] head,"—a fatal wound) to his redemption of Abram, Isaac,

in their own historical location and also point forward to a final, climactic realization in Christ” (p. 58). However, instead of *starting* typological interpretation by looking for symbols in the text which results in exploring countless rabbit trails that lead nowhere, I think it would be more efficient to look for OT “*persons, institutions, and events*”¹² that are symbolic in their own time. This eliminates many of the so-called symbols from contention as legitimate types.

4. *The way of analogy notes the similarity between the teaching or goal of the author and the teaching or goal of Jesus.* Since the church is the new Israel, one can find analogies between what God did for Israel and what God through Christ does for the church as well as analogies between what God required of Israel and what God through Christ requires of the church.
5. *The way of longitudinal themes traces the theme (or sub-theme) of the text through the OT to Jesus Christ in the NT.* Tracing a theme through the Scriptures can be time-consuming and tedious and preachers using this way need to be careful not to stall the sermon with information overload.
6. *The way of NT references usually supports the other six ways to Christ by quoting NT verses that cite or allude to the OT preaching text and link it to Christ.*
7. *The way of contrast.* I have placed this last because it is negative and I think it is better to move to Christ along the positive ways, such as redemptive-historical progression and typology, which disclose not only discontinuity (contrast) but also continuity. But there may be instances where the way of contrast can be used by noting the contrast between the message of the text and that of Jesus in the NT—a contrast that exists because Christ has come or because Christ teaches the opposite.

Interestingly, our three authors each highlight one of the first three ways to Christ listed above: Daniel Block concentrates on the way of redemptive-historical progression, Elliott Johnson on the way of promise-fulfillment, and Vern Poythress on the way of typology.

GENESIS 15:1-6

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2 But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” 4 But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” 5 He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

In preparing a sermon on this passage let me mention a few of the steps I would take.

1. Text and Context

The text has to be a literary unit, not just a verse or a fragment or a phrase which can be turned into any message. Genesis 15:1-6 is a literary unit which begins with “After these things” (a new unit) and concludes with Abram believing the LORD and the LORD reckoning his faith to him as righteousness. So we have a good preaching text.

As to its context, this is the third time the LORD makes this promise to Abram on ever grander scale. When Abram was seventy-five years old the LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you *a great nation*... (Gen 12:1-2). Later the LORD promised Abram, “I will make your offspring like *the dust of the earth*; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted” (Gen 13:16). And now that he is eighty-five years old, the LORD promises Abram, “Look toward heaven and *count the stars*, if you are able to count them ... *So shall your descendants be*” (Gen 15:5).

2. Literary Features

Characters and Character Description

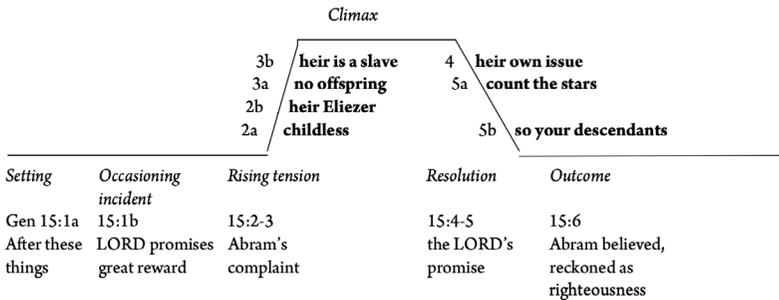
There are two main characters in this passage: the LORD and Abram. Character description is infrequent in Hebrew narrative but important

when present. With the repetitions of his promise, the LORD is presented as faithful and Abram as believing the LORD (v 6).

Repetition

Repetition will frequently reveal the issue the author wishes to emphasize. Abram is mentioned four times in the first three verses (vv. 1 [2x], 2, 3). Notice also the frequent repetition of “childless,” “no offspring,” “heir,” and “descendants.” This passage is about the lack of Abram’s descendants. But God is also mentioned four times, three times with the covenant name YHWH (LORD) and once as “Lord God.” What is the covenant God going to do about Abram’s problem? This is recorded in the verses 4-6.

The Plot Line



Sketching the narrative plot line is helpful for preparing sermons. The plot line will reveal the tension in the narrative and thus indicate how to build tension in the sermon. It also reveals the turning point in the narrative, which may be helpful in formulating the theme. In contrast to a complex plot, we can sketch this plot line as a single plot:

3. Theocentric Interpretation

The LORD is central in this narrative. He initiates the conflict by telling Abram, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (v. 1). This causes Abram to complain that after many years he is still childless and his heir is a slave (vv. 2-3). The turn in the narrative is the LORD’s promise that Abram’s descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens (vv. 4-5). Abram “believed

the LORD,” and the LORD responded by reckoning “it to him as righteousness” (v. 6)

4. Textual Theme and Goal

We can formulate the theme of this text as follows, *The LORD promises childless Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens.* The author’s goal with this message is *to assure Israel that God will be faithful to fulfill his promise to make Abram’s descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens.*

5. Ways to Preach Christ

Since there is no type of Christ in this passage, we cannot use the way of typology to preach Christ. Nor are the ways of analogy or contrast good candidates. We could possibly use redemptive-historical progression supported by NT references, but since the theme of this passage concerns God’s *promise* to Abram, the obvious way to preach Christ is the way of promise-fulfillment supported by NT references. In this case, however, the LORD’s promise gradually fills up in the course of redemptive history until it comes to complete fulfillment in the Second coming of Christ.

In the sermon, therefore, we need to show first the fulfillment of God’s promise in the OT. God’s promise to Abram was first fulfilled when the barren Sarai (Gen 11:30) became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac: “The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him” (Gen 21:1-3).

Next God fulfilled his promise of numerous descendants in the birth of Jacob and God’s promise to him, “your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth (Gen 28:14). By the time Jacob moved his family to Egypt to escape drought in the Promised Land there were a full seventy (7x10) descendants (Gen 46:27). While in Egypt “they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly” (Gen 47:27). Then they went back to the Promised Land and continued to multiply. But they were still only a small number of Jews and a few “God-fearers.”

Then came Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God opened up to Gentiles as well as Jews. In response to Peter’s sermon at Pentecost “about

three thousand persons were added [to the church]” (Acts 2:41). Paul writes in Romans 8:14–17, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God ... When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” Paul follows up: “It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants [of Abraham]” (Rom 9:8). And Paul writes “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek...; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are *Abraham’s offspring*, heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:26-29).

God’s promise of countless descendants for Abram is filling up. John reports in Revelation 7:9, “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that *no one could count*, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” When Jesus comes again, God’s promise to Abram will be completely fulfilled.

6. Sermon Theme and Goal

We formulated the textual theme as, “The LORD promises childless Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens.” In the context of the whole canon, we can formulate the sermon theme as follows: *God’s promise to childless Abram of numerous descendants gradually fills up in the OT and church history, and will be completely fulfilled when Abram’s descendant Jesus Christ comes again.*

The author’s goal with this message was “to assure Israel that God will be faithful to fulfill his promise to make Abram’s descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens.” The sermon goal will be *to assure God’s people that God will be faithful in fulfilling his promise of adding countless people to his church.* This goal points to the need this sermon could address: the concern about the declining membership of the church in North America.

The sermon introduction can flesh out the need addressed with statistics about declining membership of the church in North America, our denomination, and our own local church. The body of the sermon can

follow the plot line from the occasioning incident (v. 1) to the rising tension with Abram's complaint (vv. 2-3), to the resolution with the LORD's marvelous promise (vv. 4-5), to the outcome of Abram's faith (v. 6), to the gradual filling up of God's promise of countless descendants in the history of Israel, with the coming of Christ, Pentecost, church history, and the final filling up at Jesus' Second Coming. The conclusion of the sermon can clinch the goal: The LORD will be faithful in fulfilling his promise of adding countless people to his church.

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1. See my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 70-90.
 2. E.g., Johann Le Roux in his ThD dissertation contends that "every sermon should bear witness to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as the one singular God, who while being one, is at the same time three distinguishable persons." Quoted in my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 181, n. 10.
 3. In this article I quote the NRSV, adding italics to highlight words and phrases important for our topic.
 4. "The first English New Testament to use the verse divisions was a 1557 translation by William Whittingham (c. 1524–1579). The first Bible in English to use both chapters and verses was the Geneva Bible published shortly afterwards in 1560. These verse divisions soon gained acceptance as a standard way to notate verses, and have since been used in nearly all English Bibles and the vast majority of those in other languages." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapters_and-verses_of_the_Bible#History
 5. "Whether the preaching-text ought to be short or long can be answered in only one way: whether short or long, a preaching-text ought to be a literary unit." Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 126. For text selection for four different genres, see pp. 221-22, 250-51, 296-97, 323-25.
 6. Perry Yoder, *From Word to Life: A Guide to the Art of Bible Study* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1982), 56, as quoted in my *Modern Preacher*, 126.
 7. *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 10.
 8. Spurgeon, "Christ Precious to Believers," as quoted in David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 168.
 9. For documentation, see my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 160-62.
 10. For more detailed explanations, see my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 203-27.
 11. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament: Rediscovering the Roots of our Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 72, as quoted in my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 208.
 12. According to Eichrodt's definition, Types are "persons, institutions, and events which are regarded as divinely established models or representations of corresponding realities in the New Testament salvation history." Quoted in my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 254. See pp 255-61 for rules for using typology.