

Reflections on Preaching Christ from the Old Testament

HERSHAEL W. YORK

Hershael W. York is Victor and Louise Lester Professor of Preaching at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Dean of the School of Theology. He earned his PhD from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Cordova, Tennessee. Since coming to Southern Seminary in 1997, Dr. York has written dozens of articles in journals and online publications on preaching and he is the author of *Speaking with Bold Assurance* (B&H, 2001) and *Preaching with Bold Assurance* (B&H, 2003). His preaching has been featured in *Preaching Today* as among the best in North America, and he has twice preached at the International Congress on preaching in Cambridge, England. Dr. York is also the Senior Pastor of Buck Run Baptist Church, Frankfort, Kentucky.

How to read and to preach the Old Testament (OT) remains one of the greatest challenges and points of debate among evangelicals. It does so precisely because the issue stands at the intersection of so many others, such as: hermeneutics, biblical theology, eschatology, and homiletics—all of which are subjects of disagreements! These three essays by three serious biblical scholars demonstrate how far evangelicals are from consensus, not only on how to preach the OT, but even how to understand it and its relationship to the New Testament (NT).

I am grateful to Daniel Block, Elliott Johnson, and Vern Poythress for allowing us to peer over their shoulders as they each look at a single text and explain how they read it, understand it, and proclaim it.

One of the best arguments against open theism was written by a classical Arminian, Robert Picirilli. Calvinists predictably denounced

the suggestion that God did not know, let alone control, the future, but Picirilli's pronouncement that open theist John "Sanders and his friends may be doing evangelical Arminianism more harm than good"¹ and that it was "too flawed to be helpful,"² was effective precisely because his criticisms could not be construed as knee-jerk reactions to a view radically at odds with his own.

My criticisms of Daniel Block's article, "Christotelic Preaching: A Plea for Hermeneutical Integrity and Missional Passion," are not because I agree with the Christocentric model he condemns because I do not; nonetheless I find his characterizations largely superficial and unfair, and the argument for "Christotelic" preaching underdeveloped and inconsistent.

Block portends an argument for "missional passion" in preaching that never materializes nor merits even a passing reference beyond the first paragraph, leaving one to wonder why it deserved a place in the title—a strange irony for an article with promise and fulfillment at its heart. Furthermore, the dichotomy he laments between passionless sermons with substance and firebrand sermons that are "at best a trivial pursuit of biblical truth" (p. 8) could apply to either Christocentric or Christotelic orientations. Dull, lifeless preaching can be heard in any denomination, theology, or preaching philosophy. My deeper objections to Block's article are first, his assessment of Christocentric preaching, and second, his proposal for an alternative.

I share Block's concerns about the Christocentric model. As a frequent critic of the more extreme fringes of this homiletical approach, I fear not only an unrestrained creative typology that surpasses the warrant of Scripture, but also a model of preaching that could read meaning into *Aesop's Fables* as easily as OT narratives. I, too, worry about unwarranted "typologizing and Christologizing" that no inspired biblical author (a redundancy, for clarity's sake) ever reveals, but his characterization of it as "cheap and trivializing" and reflective of "a low view of Scripture and a low Christology" (p. 11) is undeserved. I would be interested to see an example of Christocentric preaching that betrays an insufficient view of Christ or an adherent that does not absolutely value the Bible as God's Word. He offers no evidence to support his claim.

Block assumes the guilt of Christocentric preaching without ever making the case against it by employing plenty of unflattering epithets.

With descriptive words like “demagoguery,” “dishonest,” and “fraudulent,” he accuses them of making the OT a “dead book” and veiling “the message of the inspired authors with four or five layers of trivia and speculation” (p. 18). The article begged for direct interaction with a twenty-first century author or preacher instead of one from the fourth century. If indeed Ambrose is representative of what contemporary preachers are doing then correct them rather than Ambrose. Walt Kaiser already surveyed the abuses of the church fathers in 1981 in the first chapter of *Toward an Exegetical Theology*. A critique of Dennis Johnson or Graeme Goldsworthy would have been more effective than resurrecting Ambrose.

Worst of all, however, was Block’s insinuation that a Christocentric understanding of the OT “was of a piece, not only with Ambrose’s virulent anti-Semitism, but later also of Luther’s repugnant disposition toward and treatment of the Jews of his day” (p. 17). While Ambrose and Luther should not be excused for any sinful anti-Semitism, demonstrating a connection between that and a Christocentric reading of the OT is another matter altogether, and one that the article makes no effort to prove beyond the author’s statement. Casting that pall over the many preachers who read and preach the OT Christocentrically is not only unfair but a *post hoc* fallacy.

I concur with Block’s explanation of Luke 24:27 and deny that it establishes a norm that must be followed in every sermon from any passage of the OT, but the suggestion that a Christocentric interpretation is the reason that “our Jewish friends are upset with us” because we have “hijacked their Scriptures, and made every text about Christ” (p. 13) is not a legitimate argument against Christocentric preaching. Indeed, an orthodox Jewish rabbi will be no more comfortable with Daniel Block’s view or Walt Kaiser’s view than he is with that of Sidney Greidanus or Edmund Clowney. Block himself grants that “the Bible (First and New Testaments) tells a single story of God’s gracious plan of redeeming the cosmos from sin ... That story climaxes in Jesus.” Our Jewish friends would not accept that statement either, though that can hardly be a reason to read the OT any other way.

Block is clear and, I believe, correct when he opposes locating redemptive types and Christ in passages where no NT author ever sees those things, but more troublingly he suggests that what some NT authors see really is not there at all. For this reason, I was disappointed that Block did not

engage NT texts in which the author explicitly points to an OT text, and reveals that the event, prophecy, or speech which originally referred to an immediate person or thing also refers ultimately to Christ. Block neglects to explain this phenomenon, indeed choosing not to mention it at all, in his extensive explanation of Genesis 15:1-6. After going to great lengths to clarify that he reads the Bible “forwards, interpreting Isaiah in the light of Moses, and Luke and Paul in the light of Moses and Isaiah” (p. 15), one is astounded that he ignores Galatians 3:16 in which Paul unequivocally says that the singular seed of Abraham was Christ. How does his “forward” reading explain this?

Block’s assertion that “Moses does not need to account to Paul, but Paul needs to account to Moses, and if he contradicts Moses, he is the one under the anathema of Deuteronomy 13” (p. 16) leaves one wondering whether Block considers Paul’s identification of Abram’s seed as Christ, which cannot be asserted merely on the exegesis of Genesis 15:1-6, contradiction, allegory, or additional revelation. Block carefully guides his readers through his reading of Moses, but he leaves us wondering how he reads Paul. Has *Paul* angered his Jewish friends with his understanding of Genesis 15? Indeed, he has!

In addition, what does Block’s forward reading make of the NT category of “mystery,” something that was previously hidden but has now been revealed in Christ? While “Later revelation cannot correct, annul, or contradict earlier revelation” (p. 16), subsequent inspired revelation certainly can correct, annul, and contradict earlier incomplete or wrong human assumptions about that previous revelation. More importantly, NT revelation adds *more* to that single story of redemption that illumines OT narratives in the light of Christ and his work. We cannot read the Bible merely forward or backward, but every constituent part contributes to the whole and the whole sheds light on every constituent part. While subsequent revelation cannot nullify an original author’s meaning, it certainly can reveal that the Holy Spirit meant more than the original context made plain.

How does Block account for this phenomenon? When Paul claimed that the Rock that followed the Israelites in the wilderness was Christ (1 Cor 10:4) was he guilty of eisegesis? Was he merely using the vocabulary of the exodus? When Block does not answer this question in his article, he leaves

the distinct impression that Paul must one day stand before the judgment seat of Moses and answer for a Christological emphasis that Moses never intended.

I share Block's concerns about Christocentric overreach and about the insistence that every single sermon from the OT *must* show a connection to Christ. In a pastoral context, surely a pastor can construct and explain a redemptive historical framework and remind his congregation of it often enough that he need not restate it in every sermon when he's preaching through 2 Samuel. Surely one must preach on David's greater Son from 2 Samuel 7, but I reject that preaching against adultery from 2 Samuel 11 is mere moralism, particularly when a pastor has already taught his congregation about David's greater Son on many occasions. Like Scripture itself, we should evaluate our pastoral ministry as a whole rather than through the lens of any single sermon.

Still, Block's uncharitable mischaracterization of Christocentric preaching and his refusal to engage NT authors who see Christological significance in texts that also have an immediate referent, make his suggestion of Christotelic preaching unconvincing.

Finally, I do not know what to make of Block's summation of the Mosaic sacrificial system. Insisting that faithful Israelites had no understanding of the sacrifices as a precursor to a future earthly event, he encapsulates their faith as knowing "that *if their lives were in order* (emphasis added) and if they brought their sacrifices with contrite hearts and according to God's revealed way of forgiveness, they were forgiven" (p. 15). Apart from the question of what they knew about future events, the statement begs the question, how much order in their lives was enough?

Toward the opposite end of the Christocentric spectrum, Elliott Johnson's call for a Christo-Promise hermeneutic and preaching, attempts to mediate the historical-grammatical approach to expository preaching with a recognition that Christ is the fulfillment of all of God's promises and covenants. He rightly diagnoses that "the problem emerges when the presence of Christ in the text is difficult to substantiate" (p. 35).

This is precisely why one might wish that, rather than Genesis 15:1-6, which Paul clearly points to as fulfilled in Christ, these three essayists had been assigned a text to which the NT makes no Christological reference, or better yet, one that makes a reference distinctly focused on behavior rather

than soteriological faith. As I read Johnson, I kept wondering how he would explain the way James uses the OT, because he does not seem to follow the Christocentric model. For example, in his treatment of 1 Kings 17, James makes no Christological reference but points to Elijah as a faithful example of prayer (James 5:17-18).

Would it be legitimate to preach Elijah as a type of Christ in precisely the same way that the author of Hebrews sees Melchizedek? Even apart from Psalm 110, which mentions his perpetual priesthood, the author of Hebrews makes much of the fact that Melchizedek is “without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever” (Heb 7:3). Are readers of the NT free to suggest Elijah as a type of Christ not merely because he is a prophet but because the OT never gives his genealogy and he never dies? Certainly the Holy Spirit makes connections that we might not otherwise see without his revelation. Similarly, the Spirit remains silent where Christ is not specifically foreshadowed in type and it seems presumptuous and forced to interject a type that the Spirit did not unambiguously indicate.

Though my question about Elijah is beyond the scope of Johnson’s essay, he nonetheless plainly argues that any passage of promise in the OT includes Christ, not only in NT fulfillment, but even in the authorial intent, “whether or not we have indication in the text that characters did understand” (p. 36). This assertion is certainly defensible in light of 1 Peter 1:10-12 provided that one interprets Peter as saying that what they searched for was the identity of the Christ and the time of his arrival.

Johnson’s proposal of Christo-Promise preaching is more satisfying than Block’s apparent disconnect between original authorial intent in the OT and what the NT writers do with it, merely relying on it for a vocabulary with which to explain redemption. Johnson sees the identity of Christ in the seed of Abram, but does he believe that to be the human author’s intent or was that the intent of the Spirit only revealed later in time?

Of the three articles, Poythress’ “Christocentric Preaching”—though he himself admits that his definition and practice of it “may disappoint those who expect a robust defense of a classical understanding of Christocentric preaching”—(p. 51) is personally the most satisfying because he seems to grapple with and attempt to resolve certain tensions in preaching with

the restraints of authorial intent, while consciously locating it in the metanarrative of God's redemptive work in history. While Block warns against reading Christ into Joshua or the exodus, and Johnson implies that authors were conscious of every promise's fulfillment in a Messiah, Poythress resolves the tension first by allowing the preacher freedom to use various strategies to convey biblical truth, even in the narrow confines of Genesis 15:1-6, and second by expanding his understanding of how to keep Christ at the "center" of preaching.

As a deeply committed expositor whose weekly pastoral preaching is almost exclusively passage by passage through books of the Bible, I nonetheless concur with Poythress that this is a strategy based on wisdom and pragmatism within a conviction about *sola scriptura* and agree that "no passage in Scripture restricts preachers to this method" (p. 55).

Interestingly, even as Poythress argues that "no passage in Scripture restricts preachers to this method," he then insists that "preaching in Acts and the letters in the NT provide examples of the centrality of Christ" (p. 55). I certainly agree that most of the preaching in the NT does that, but, again, I must point to the epistle of James. How does the epistle of James fit into his insistence that "the centrality of Christ in the life of the NT church implies his centrality in the preaching and teaching of the church" (p. 48)? If that is the methodology of for preachers to follow, why does James not make that explicit in the way he teaches the OT to NT believers? I appreciate Poythress' trinitarian emphasis and warning against Christomonism, whether convictionally employed or simply by default. But again, should we insist on an explicit methodology that the Holy Spirit does not lead one of his inspired authors to employ?

After reading these essays written by three scholars for whom I have great respect and admiration, I am even more keenly aware of the difficulty of finding consensus in hermeneutics and homiletics, particularly in preaching the OT. Poythress' admonition to exercise freedom governed by *sola scriptura* seems the most liberating and yet properly confining advice for the preacher of the OT: "the principle of *sola scriptura* also governs *how* the preacher does his preaching" (p. 54). When the inspired authors of the NT reveal or clarify a type or meaning that I may not have otherwise seen, I am free, even responsible, to preach it. When the Scripture itself does not bear witness to a type or meaning, I should not assert that I do.

-
1. Robert Picirilli, "An Arminian Response to John Sanders's The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44/3 (September 2001): 467.
 2. *Ibid.*, 491.