

Preaching the Christian Gospel from Old Testament Texts

Colleagues,

At the Crossings “Honest to God Gospel” get-together last January, there was one “closed” session. While Sherman Lee and I were doing a “Word of God and My Daily Work” Crossings demonstration before the plenum, the Text Study staff writers, who crank out the weekly diagnosis/prognosis postings—Steps 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6—each week, were (like the disciples in this coming Sunday’s Gospel) “behind closed doors.” Doing what? Doing their own mini-conference for “moving into Sabbathology Internet postings on texts from the Old Testament.” Up till now all the text studies offered over the past years—now all archived on the Crossings website: <www.crossings.org>— have been on the Sunday “gospel” pericopes from the Revised Standard Lectionary, with an occasional side-glance to the Second Reading for the day, a.k.a. the “Sunday epistle.” But now the team wants to tackle the Old Testament readings assigned for every Sunday and Feast Day. That’s not easy. If you think it is, then try to answer this question: What’s the difference between a Jewish sermon (for a synagogue congregation) and a Christian one (for a Christ-confessing congregation) on a text from Isaiah? Or Deuteronomy? Or Genesis?

They have not (yet) told me what happened in that “off limits” gathering. I did see (in advance) the teaser that Jerry Burce had circulated among them to get their conversation going. It’s now already 3 months old. I have his permission to pass it on to all of you. I think it’s pretty good.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

To Sabbatheology Writers-On the Crossing of Old Testament Texts: Some Thoughts to Start the Discussion

Caveat: This is rough and hasty. Read it, please, with that in mind.

Part 1. On Sucking It Up. A Preliminary Consideration.

- 1. In approaching the “crossing” of Old Testament texts, it is imperative that we commit ourselves at the outset to the grieving of our preferred OT scholars.*
- 2. Said scholars, filling the chairs of mainline seminaries and divinity schools, insist on reading the OT documents on their own terms, without reference to the NT. We are not permitted to do that. Else Christ is not preached.*
- 3. And why does the Church read and study the OT if not for the preaching of Christ? One of our tasks-perhaps our chief task-will be to remind the Church of this.*
- 4. To use the OT for the preaching of Christ is not the same as “reading Christ” into the OT. My own teachers objected strenuously to this. “Do not pretend,” said they, “that Isaiah, announcing that ‘unto us a Child is born,’ was thinking of Jesus.” In saying this they were attacking a hoary interpretive tradition that took such claims for granted.*
- 5. This tradition, by the way, was not an apostolic tradition, but a skewed variant thereof. My teachers were right to back us away from it.*
- 6. Matthew, for example, does not assert that Jeremiah was predicting Herod’s slaughter of the innocents when he wrote of Rachel weeping for her children. What he does say is that the slaughter “fulfilled” Jeremiah’s word (Mt. 2:17). That is, it filled the word up, so to speak,*

with new content and ultimate meaning.

7. Such moves-John and Luke are also fond of them-keep tipping us off to the chief apostolic point, namely that God's word is completed in Christ, and only on getting to Christ does one really "get" what that word is for and about. See esp. Lk. 24:26-27, 45ff.
8. Today's exegetical guild is bound by its rules of procedure to dismiss this key apostolic point as fanciful and farfetched. This shouldn't surprise us. After all, those guild rules forbid the asking of the only question the apostles are interested in, namely "What has God done about keeping his word?"
9. Modern exegesis, remember, is an anthropocentric enterprise. Its key question is not "What has God said or done?" Instead it asks "What have men/women said that God has said or done?" In keeping with modernity it insists that the latter question is the only question that can be asked with any hope of arriving at a dependable answer.
10. Preaching, by contrast, is a theocentric enterprise. At its core is the very question the exegetes refuse on principle to touch.
11. Thus the exegete is bound by her rules to ask "What does Isaiah (whoever he may be) imagine God to be saying, and why?"
12. By contrast the preacher is bound by her rules to ask "What is God saying to us through Isaiah?" And if a Christian preacher, she'll also ask "What has God done in Christ to 'fill up' what he says through Isaiah?" See, e.g., the evangelist Philip preaching to the Ethiopian (Acts 8).
13. The preacher who fails to ask these questions is no preacher at all, but a charlatan who is wasting the time of the congregation he preaches to and defrauding it of the salary it pays him.

14. *The apostles were preachers. So were the prophets. So are we. All of us are equally bound, therefore, to dismay the exegetes. Let us do so with verve and joy, in happy imitation of Peter, Paul, John, and the synoptic evangelists-and, yes, the aforementioned Philip.*

Part 2. On the Task Proper. Some First Thoughts.

15. *In approaching OT texts we do well to think not of Law and Gospel but of Law and Promise.*
16. *Of Law there is much in these texts. Dreadfully. Micah 6:8 is a good example. And of Promise there is just as much. Wonderfully. See Jer. 31:31-34. Some texts are marvelously double-edged, dreadful Law and wonderful Promise interlaced. Check out Isaiah 55:11.*
17. *Gospel is the post-OT announcement of Law and Promise alike fulfilled in the cross, albeit in very different ways.*
18. *The Law fulfilled is a) the Law exposed, the enormity of its threat made evident through its killing of our representative at our own rebellious hands. It is also b) the Law defanged, its power to lay ultimate hurt on us absorbed in its ultimate hurting of Christ. Thus the import, e.g., of Christ's dying quotation of Psalm 22. "He screamed it for me"-that's Gospel.*
19. *The Promise fulfilled is the Promise secured and underwritten in the indelible blood of the One for us. Example: see the Promise-rich text of Advent 3, Zeph. 3:14-20. One can make a double move with it. a) Read "Christ" where it says "the Lord God." b) Read "Christ" where it says "you," remembering that "Christ" is "Christ-for-us," the term thereby embracing all who are "in Christ." Notice how in either case the Promise blossoms into full-fledged Gospel, which in turn*

heightens the text's promissory impact. "These things shall be! How can they not be?"

20. So it is that OT crossings will move of necessity (and to the exegete's chagrin) beyond the bounds of the text itself into Christ-talk. The integrity of the crossing will be measured by whether and how well that Christ-talk is correlated with the categories in which the text either lays down the Law or holds out the Promise.
21. One way to maintain that integrity is to check for NT contexts in which the OT passage is quoted or alluded to, and, if available, to draw the Christ-talk from there.
22. Another way, always available, is to draw the Christ-talk from the Epistle or the Gospel for the day, both of which will be part of the preaching context. The minds behind the lectionary appear to have made a conscious effort to pair OT and Gospel texts, not always with equal success but almost always with some success. For an example of great success, see the texts for Lent 1, Series A, i.e. the succumbing of Adam and Eve to the tempter (Gen. 3) vs. Jesus' refusal to succumb (Mt. 4, with its patent connection via "if you are the Son of God" to Mt. 27), coupled with Paul's mention of "the one righteous act" by which all are made righteous (Ro. 5:18). Only the brain dead will fail to hit a home run here.
23. There are three crossings of OT texts on our web site. The first is a sermon by Bob Bertram on Psalm 118 (<https://crossings.org/thursday/2005/thur032405.shtml>). The second is a lengthy six-step study, also by Bob, of Isaiah 42:1-9 (<https://crossings.org/archive/bob/BaptismalCrossing.pdf>). The third is by the undersigned, a six-step study of Psalm 2, also lengthy and festooned with a fair amount of preliminary reflection (<https://crossings.org/thursday/2005/thur072105.shtml>).

(My thanks to Ed Schroeder for pointing me to the Bertram pieces.)

24. *As preparation for our writers' conclave at the conference, I respectfully urge a close reading of all three pieces, though with particular attention to the latter two, a) because of their six-step format, b) because both take time to address issues of methodology and hermeneutics, some of which, I suspect, we'll want to discuss at our meeting.*

Jerome Burce