

James Henry Harris. *Beyond the Tyranny of the Text: Preaching in Front of the Bible to Create a New World*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019. 182 pages. \$24.99.

In *Beyond the Tyranny of the Text*, James Harris proposes a liberative homiletical model grounded in the Black preaching tradition and the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. Harris argues that preaching must grapple with the “world in front of the text” if preaching is going to participate in liberation (2). This prioritization of the world in front of the text does not negate exegesis or the world of the text; rather, it allows a new hearing of the text to envision transforming liberation in the present. While Harris gives Ricoeur credit for the hermeneutical theory, he recognizes that Black preachers have often done what Ricoeur theoretically describes. The work offers “a five-part method and theory for getting in front of the text that includes, *reading, re-reading, un-reading, writing, and re-writing* (or the act of actually preaching the sermon)” (3).

Each of the book’s five chapters focuses on one of the steps in Harris’ methodology. The first chapter discusses how to read the text with liberation in mind by getting in front of the text. The reader approaches the text with liberation as the context which allows the reader to interpret from a liberative position. For Harris, this reading seeks to envision a “new horizon and a new world absent of oppression and injustice” (16). Harris follows Ricoeur in asserting that interpretation depends on recognizing the sense of the text as being negotiated in a possible world projected by the text. In other words, Harris gives priority to what the text means to people today, in the context of liberation, even while not completely dismissing what the text meant in its original context; “Meaning is textual and contextual” (22). After the initial step of reading that grapples with text and context, chapter two discusses the need for re-reading. Re-reading recognizes that the first step, reading, is never finished in the process of sermon development. Re-reading also asserts that the preacher should never allow the written word to obfuscate the poetry and aesthetics of preaching, which require ongoing attention.

Chapter 3, which discusses un-reading, is a core component of Harris’ methodology. The process of un-reading seeks to resist hegemonic readings that have subjugated people. Harris argues that new meanings can only come to the front when harmful, traditional meanings are unlearned. Un-reading also contends that preaching ought to participate in liberation. The world in front of the text opens the way for liberation to be appropriated and actualized in the present world because it calls the congregation to liberating praxis. The fourth step is to start writing, which requires a synthesis of aspects from the previous steps. The focus of writing is not to produce a perfectly polished sermon but to refine understanding and explanation in written form. This process continues in the final step, which includes re-writing and the actual preaching of the sermon. The final chapter explores how un-reading and the world in front of the text can allow the sermon to “pursue a proleptic vision of the text as an instrument of transformation and freedom” (127). Each of the chapters contains sermon excerpts on the book of Jonah. These provide practical examples of the methods described by Harris. The sermon excerpts also concretize the conceptual category of liberation through the exploration of race in preaching. The work includes an appendix that provides insights for un-reading particular passages.

*Beyond the Tyranny of the Text* excels as an interdisciplinary work that discusses homiletics and hermeneutics. Harris provides a vision of liberative preaching that can be actualized through an application of Ricoeurian hermeneutics. Harris should be commended for making major aspects of Ricoeur’s interpretation theory accessible to preachers. With the skill of a seasoned scholar, he offers a robust dialogue between theory and practice. He models how

Ricoeur's central dialectics, especially explanation and understanding, can provide a new model of textual liberation preaching in the world in front of the text. Harris understands preaching as an interpretation and converses with Ricoeur to describe how preaching can be a liberative interpretation. Harris writes from the Black context and about Black preaching, at the same time, his five-fold model can be utilized by any preacher willing to take up the arduous task of preaching liberation. While there is more work to be done for preaching paradigms to embrace the world in front of the text, *Beyond the Tyranny of the Text* adeptly continues Harris' lifelong theological understanding of preaching liberation.

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