

Homiletical Exegesis and Theologies of Revelation: Biblical Preaching from Text to Sermon in an Age of Methodological Pluralism¹

David Schnasa Jacobsen

Professor of Homiletics, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and Toronto School of Theology

Abstract: *The methodological focus of homiletic theories that move from text to sermon has sometimes occluded theological commitments that lurk behind those methods. Rather than viewing contemporary homiletic theory as lacking theological concern, this essay follows Susan Bond's insight in Contemporary African American Preaching to expose theological commitments behind methodological choices. The article uses in particular M. H. Abram's typology of literary theories in The Mirror and the Lamp to identify implicit hermeneutical orientations behind both critical approaches to texts (Biblical methods) and what homileticians aim to do in sermons (homiletic theory). The article then construes for preachers Abram's fourfold typology of literary theories as the world behind the text, the mind of the text, the world of the text, and the audience in front of the text and connects them to four of Avery Dulles' "models of revelation": revelation as history, inner-experience, dialectical presence, and new awareness. In the process, Jacobsen opens the possibility of thinking about the relationship of homiletic theory to theology in more fruitful and dynamic ways.*

Introduction

Homiletic theory has often succumbed to a temptation common to sub-disciplines of practical theology: the reduction of its task to the application of technical reason to clerical practices. This has led, as theologian Edward Farley noted, to a theologically truncated notion of practical theology.² As a result, pastoral care has become captive to psychology; Christian education to pedagogy; and, of course, homiletics to rhetoric. This essay, however, does not merely wish to subjugate homiletics to another master. Instead, it simply seeks to allow systematic theology to frame homiletical reflection on a very practical problem for preaching today: how to understand the move from text to sermon in an age of methodological pluralism.

The impact of this critical pluralism is not hard to see among biblical scholars. Where once the interests of historical-critical scholars reigned supreme, biblical scholarship has now been forced to accommodate critical approaches that focus also on reading and reception. As a result, the already diverse matters of history, literary sources, social world, form, redaction, and tradition are now supplemented by critical concerns with modern and post-modern literary readings, ideological forms of criticism, and matters of canon and intertextuality.³

¹ This article first appeared in *Systematisch Praktisch: Festschrift für Reiner Preul* (Eds. W. Härle, B-M Haese, K. Hansen, and E. Herms; Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 2005), 449-461. I wish to thank the publisher for agreeing to let me adapt it for publication here.

² He identifies this problem as part of his broader concern for a more fulsome sense of what theology is in his essay, "Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm," in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, (D. Browning, ed.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 21-41.

³ Recent surveys of exegetical methods in biblical studies have helpfully cataloged the options and set them side by side for critical consideration. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes' edited volume, *To Each Its Own Meaning: Biblical Criticisms and their Application* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) is exemplary in this regard. For treatments of the growing pains that accompanied the shift from classic, historical-critical approaches to the broad panoply of methods available today, see William Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament*

The emergence of diverse methodologies in contemporary homiletic theory is also easy to see. Contemporary homiletic theory emerged partly in response to overly didactic and deductive modes of homiletical invention.⁴ Inspired in part by the notion of the sermon as a language event in the “new hermeneutic” of Fuchs and Ebeling and the shift toward literary and rhetorical concerns in biblical studies, homileticians began exploring different ways of conceiving their inventional task.⁵ The result is a range of methods that focus on matters of language and the shape of discourse such as inductive preaching, storytelling, multiple forms of narrative preaching, phenomenological preaching, preaching shaped by the rhetorical force of the biblical text, and approaches that emphasize analogies and metaphors.

The argument in this essay is that the captivity of contemporary homiletics to technical reason arises not only out of the nature of its own text-to-sermon tasks, but in the relationship of those tasks to the wide range of methodological options in homiletics and biblical studies. By analyzing carefully the hermeneutical stances toward the Biblical text of those methods, however, preachers can also uncover implicit *theological* commitments, especially about revelation.⁶ The aim of this work, then, is to be neither prescriptive nor categorical, but descriptive and heuristic. The hope is that this essay can build new bridges between the diverse fields of biblical scholarship and homiletics by means of a neglected partner to both fields: systematic theology.⁷

The Problem: From Text to Sermon with Biblical Preaching

The reality of this problem is quite tangible for the person charged with the weekly task of preaching. One might imagine, for example, a preacher who has decided to preach on an upcoming lectionary pericope from the Pentateuch. Because the preacher was educated by biblical and homiletical professors who valued critical thinking, she naturally includes as part of her “text to sermon” process a consultation of the works of leading commentators on the Pentateuch. When she picks up one commentary, however, she discovers that her Pentateuchal text has been subdivided into its early strands: a few verses belong to J, still others to E, as well as a few editorial insertions which might belong to P. What is our fictional preacher to make of

(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 5-7; Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 13-26, 67-114; and Norman R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 24-33; and A. K. M. Adams, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

⁴ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971). Helpful surveys of the many other developments over the last thirty years can be found in Richard Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987); Lucy Rose, *Sharing The Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); and John McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Post-Modern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001).

⁵ Again, Craddock’s above cited work is instructive in this regard.

⁶ The goal in this essay is modest from a theological point of view. It offers a way to map and identify theological commitments that may be implicit in hermeneutical orientations to Biblical texts and sermons. The goal is not to help preachers develop a theology of revelation, but to identify and locate where such theologies may be already implicitly active in the practice of exegesis and/or sermon construction. The reference to systematic theology does not imply that the result of such an exercise is itself fully systematic, just that it deals with a key locus of systematic theology: the doctrine of revelation in relation to actual reading and preaching practices. While preachers may not always have a full systematic theology, implications of the same can be fruitful invitations to ongoing systematic theological reflection. However, for the purposes of this essay, the goal is merely to offer such an invitation.

⁷ L. Susan Bond has posed the question of the relationship of homiletic theory and theology in helpful ways in her book, *Contemporary African American Preaching: Diversity in Theory and Style* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 5-33.

these fruits of critical biblical scholarship in her pulpit? Naturally, one can rejoice that biblical scholarship since Wellhausen has refused to leave this matter to the pre-critical pieties that naively assert Mosaic authorship.⁸ Apart from that critical gain, however, one should feel free to ask what preachers actually do with this information. The problem is certainly not that this critical exegetical finding is useless; it is rather that its importance does not correspond to the critical task of the preacher in this instance.

As practical theologians, homileticians ought not to take the above problematic too lightly. Having found in practice a profound disconnect between the findings of critical scholarship of the Bible and the kinds of practical judgments made by preachers, one cannot blithely assert that preaching ought to be “biblical.” One needs, rather, to understand what problems lurk in one’s presuppositions, especially any elements that would explain why the path of moving critically from “text to sermon” is so fraught with peril. Here it will be useful to consider the sources of the problem relationally: first between theology and biblical studies and second between theology and preaching.

1. Theology and Biblical Studies

On one level one could locate the tensions in this relationship in the development of modern biblical criticism itself. From the very beginning modern questions about the truth of biblical texts have served at least two functions. On the one hand, critical research could be used to buttress authority claims. On the other hand, biblical criticism could seriously undermine traditional pieties or dogmatic assertions, as with the foundational work of Hobbes and Spinoza.⁹ From the very beginning, biblical criticism has cut both ways relative to theology.

In the nineteenth century, however, the split became pronounced. At the very height of liberal theology’s prominence and the identification of that theological program with the emerging contours of the life of Jesus research in New Testament studies come the work of both Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. Over against the liberal Jesus and the progressive realization of the liberal ethical ideal of the kingdom of God, Weiss argues on the grounds of a history of religions approach that Jesus preaches a scandalously first-century, thoroughgoing eschatology.¹⁰ A few years later in an incisive review of life of Jesus research, Schweitzer succeeds in demolishing what is left of the nineteenth century’s Jesus with his portrayal of an apocalypticist who refuses to reflect liberalism back to itself.¹¹ The upshot is a split between biblical scholarship and theology. If the goal of liberal theology was to shake off the shackles of old dogmatisms, the goal of the biblical criticism at the threshold of the twentieth century was to throw off the shackles of the dominant liberal theology, and by implication all theology itself.

⁸ A succinct history of Wellhausen’s contribution to forging a source-critical consensus for reading the Pentateuch can be found in Douglas A Knight’s article, “The Pentateuch,” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker, eds.; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 265.

⁹ A helpful history of how their early critical work marks a beginning to a radically critical approach to scripture is found in S. J. De Vries’ article, “Biblical Criticism, History of,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Vol. I; G. A. Buttrick, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 414. For an interesting treatment of Spinoza and his role in the development of modern Biblical criticism, see Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (2nd Ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 30-45.

¹⁰ Johannes Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (R. H. Hiers and D. R. Holland, eds. and trans.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

¹¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (W. Montgomery, trans.; New York: MacMillan, 1948), 396-401.

As a result, biblical scholarship conceives of itself as a discipline over against theology. There have been attempts to bridge the gap. Various movements in biblical theology and canonical criticism have sought ways across the chasm. For the most part, however, the field of biblical studies seeks to pursue its work in ways that often bracket the interests of the theologian. In our own time, we have witnessed a proliferation of methods of biblical criticism that can be done with little immediate regard for theological interests: form criticism, composition criticism, literary/narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, sociological criticism, psychological criticism, etc. This is not to say that theology should be uninterested in its results. The point is merely this: it is altogether possible to engage the biblical text by means of any number of critical methodologies without relating the process or its results to theological understanding. Those of us who educate preachers for the church need to understand this reality and come to terms with it.

2. Theology and Preaching

The nature of this second problematic relationship, theology and preaching, has been well described in the work of theologian Edward Farley. In a 1994 article in *Theology Today*, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” Farley unpacks the theological issues of what he calls the “bridge paradigm” that, despite the methodological pluralism of contemporary homiletics, underlies so much of preaching and homiletic theory in North America. The problem with the bridge paradigm according to Farley is that it assumes only that the content of the Bible itself needs to be carried over into our world and that that content is equally distributed throughout the two-testament canon. In the end, such a view actually distorts the Bible itself, because “the Bible is not an aggregate of thousands of authoritative and preachable passages.”¹² Indeed, by presupposing that any part of the biblical text has a preachable content in it, the paradigm inadvertently buys into a fundamentalistic view of scripture.¹³ In the end, however, even the Bible gives no solace to the bridge paradigm:

One thing is clear in the New Testament accounts. That which is preached is not the content of passages of scripture. It is the gospel, the event of Christ through which we are saved. To think that what is preached is the Bible and the content of its passages is a quite different way of thinking about preaching.¹⁴

If Farley is correct, this would explain why there is often a disconnect between the results of critical exegesis (which widen the gap) and a homiletical invention that applies the text with rhetorical sleight of hand. The bridge paradigm demands something that is impossible to fulfill.

It would be easy to assume that Farley has no further interest in biblical preaching. This, however, is far from the case. Although Farley holds to the priority of preaching the gospel over preaching the Bible, the Bible still has a place.¹⁵ What he has done is to place the preaching of the Bible within a theological frame: the preaching of the gospel.

¹² Edward Farley, “Toward a New Paradigm in Preaching,” in *Preaching as a Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture* (T. G. Long and E. Farley, eds.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 165.

¹³ Farley, “Gospel,” 94-95.

¹⁴ Farley, “Gospel,” 93.

¹⁵ Farley, “Gospel,” 103.

Yet somehow the problematic relationship of preaching and theology that Farley describes still needs to be addressed in a more fundamental way. Is there a way one can take advantage of the pluralism of contemporary approaches to homiletics despite their seeming dependency on the bridge paradigm? How can theology frame the homiletical and exegetical task in a way that aids preaching to be *critically* biblical instead of inventionally disingenuous? The goal is not to reconstruct the bridge paradigm, but to identify the conditions under which theology might engage and enable a kind of biblical preaching that can account for the pluralistic realities of critical exegesis and homiletics. Answers to these questions proceed on the basis of two hermeneutical proposals that lead to a theological frame for the work of homiletical exegesis.

The First Hermeneutical Proposal: A Reconfiguration of the Relationship of Application and Interpretation

While Farley's theological objections to the bridge paradigm are substantial and far-reaching, it is important also to consider how the structure of the relationship between biblical studies, homiletics, and theology impacts their problematic relationships. Here it is helpful to take a hermeneutical turn that will allow a reconsideration of the issues from a different perspective.

In an earlier example we imagined a pastor struggling over how to preach using the fruits of modern critical biblical scholarship. Just how does one preach a text that a commentary has divided into literary-critical sources like J, E, and P? While the broader problem, according to Farley, is first a profound theological one, it is still also a hermeneutical one—and here the problem is also more than technical. The example presupposes that the task of the preacher is merely to receive the fruits of biblical criticism. That, however, represents a hermeneutically problematic division of labor.

The great hermeneutical philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, nicely anticipates the problem when he writes: "But even today it is still the case that an interpreter's task is not simply to repeat what one of the partners says in the discussion he is translating, but to express what is said in the way that seems most appropriate to him (*sic*), *considering the real situation of the dialogue, which only he knows, since he alone knows both languages being used in the discussion.*"¹⁶ (emphasis mine) That, in the end, is the key to understanding this unspoken hermeneutical problem for our exemplary preacher of a Pentateuchal text: if preachers do not value rightly their hermeneutical role as those who alone know "both languages being used in the discussion," the interpretation will abort. As resident theologians in actual congregations, and theologizing for their sakes, preachers need to be more than recipients of exegetical knowledge. They need to be active participants in the interpretive act for the hermeneutical process to work.

Structuring the text to sermon process without heeding the active, interpretive role of the preacher merely replicates a kind of "knowledge high priesthood." Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for one, tries to fight this debilitating view by inviting interpreters to view both exegesis and application, both discerning what the text "meant" and proclaiming what the text "means," as rhetorical acts.¹⁷ This is to say that every interpretation, even one promoted by a biblical scholar

¹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd ed.; J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall, trans.; New York: Crossroad, 1992), 308. Please note that the transformational nature of such dialogue continues today, transforming even Gadamer's limited vision of partners to include women as well.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 1-5.

of the guild, is done from a perspective—it is *invested*. One suspects that Gadamer might agree: one cannot simply bracket out the work of applying a text (usually the preacher’s job) from interpreting it (supposedly the biblical scholar’s job)—a notion on which such a high priesthood of exegetical knowledge would actually depend.

Another New Testament scholar, Mary Ann Tolbert, has proposed a model that will allow preachers to reconsider their role vis-à-vis biblical scholarship. In her book *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective* Tolbert argues that two criteria should be at work in defining any approach to biblical interpretation: text-specific criteria and goal-specific criteria.¹⁸ Text-specific criteria refer to those elements determined by the text itself, namely its various aspects and circumstances. Goal-specific criteria, by contrast, are determined by the scope of what is under study and what one hopes to learn thereby. Tolbert puts it pointedly: “One should select the method of study...on the basis of what one is seeking generally to learn from the text.”¹⁹ Tolbert’s idea has a profound resonance with a hermeneutical concern for application as part of the interpretive process and actualizes Gadamer’s seminal insight.²⁰ As a result, one might begin to re-envision what biblical preaching might look like in light of Farley’s critique and Gadamer’s hermeneutical insight. This leads to the second hermeneutical proposal.

The Second Hermeneutical Proposal: The Heuristic Value of Hermeneutical Stance for Biblical Preaching

In recent years both biblical scholars and homileticians have struggled to deal with the pluralism of their fields. As a way of negotiating their way through the many methodologies available to them, they have begun identifying methods of interpretation relative to what one might call here “hermeneutical stance.”²¹ Two important figures will serve to surface the issue: Sandra Schneiders and David Bartlett.

Examples of Hermeneutical Stance in Biblical Studies and Homiletics

New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders identifies three elements of what she calls the “revelatory text”: the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world before the text.²² While Schneiders views these as hermeneutical moments, and not as exclusive choices, she nonetheless identifies these hermeneutical moments with certain methodological options. Thus, “the world behind the text” is associated generally with historical-critical concerns (although not exclusively so), the “world of the text” with literary-critical approaches, and the “world before the text” with more reader-oriented methods. Her goal is not so much to categorize, as to understand the plethora of methodological options within a hermeneutical framework that makes sense of the whole unitary action of coming to an understanding.

¹⁸ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gadamer notes “we consider application to be just as integral a part of the hermeneutical process.” Idem., 308.

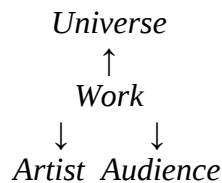
²¹ I attempt to deal with these realities in my own work on the homiletical problems posed by apocalyptic materials in *Preaching in the New Creation: The Promise of New Testament Apocalyptic Texts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 2-5, 10-17.

²² Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 97-179.

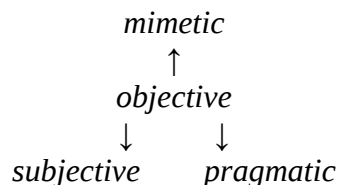
Homiletician David Bartlett does something similar in his book, *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching*. Trained in classical historical-critical methods, he struggles to integrate his work as a teacher of preaching with the welter of new approaches available to the preacher as biblical interpreter: literary criticism, rhetorical criticism, ideological approaches, etc. As a way of organizing how a preacher might approach this methodological pluralism, Bartlett considers the “world in front of the text,” the “world behind the text,” and finally the relationship of “our world and the text.”²³ In the process, Bartlett does not so much reject a historical-critical orientation as place it within a wider conversation and an accompanying breadth of hermeneutical stances relative to the biblical text.

An Alternative Approach: Hermeneutical Stance Through M. H. Abrams’ Typology of Literary Theories

Although the kinds of distinctions that Schneiders and Bartlett make are helpful, we might gain more insight on our problem by pushing a little further. Rather than identify hermeneutical stances vis-à-vis the text as a matter of pure positionality (before, in front of, behind, etc.), one might try distinguishing them at the level of critical content, their “objects” of criticism. In doing so, we can draw insights from how critical scholars in other fields have looked at the kinds of hermeneutical relationships under discussion here: namely, the relation of texts to *critical* stances. Literary critic M. H. Abrams offers a critical typology that proves useful in this regard. In his book *The Mirror and the Lamp* Abrams argues that within the critical tradition there are at least four general approaches critics have employed to orient themselves to a literary work:²⁴



Although no critic adopts just one perspective exclusively, they do typically embody, says Abrams, a primary orientation to one of the following: the universe which the work re-presents, the artist who produced the work, the audience which is affected by the work, or the work as a kind of self-sufficient entity. In turn, each orientation begets a certain kind of approach to interpreting a text. Abrams identifies these as the following:



²³ David Bartlett, *Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 37-137.

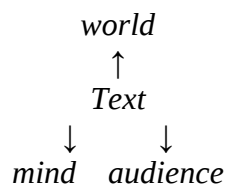
²⁴ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 1953), 3-29. What follows in the balance of this section is a summary of Abrams’ argument.

Mimetic criticism, which focuses on the “universe,” is interested in how a literary work “represents” that universe: usually in the form of nature, reality, or ideas. One thinks here of Plato’s view of poetry: its value is found chiefly in representing something of a higher order external to the work, e.g., the ideal. Subjective criticism, by contrast, tends to interpret a literary work with reference to its author, the “artist.” Here one might come to understand and appreciate the works of Shakespeare or Goethe by understanding better the life history of the author as it shapes his/her subjective, inner life. Pragmatic criticism tends to measure the value of a text by a criterion in front of it, namely its audience. From this critical perspective one might judge the value of a work of art by reporting the depth, nature, or process of its impact on those who view it. Finally, in the middle of Abrams’ triangle is the objective form of literary criticism, which focuses on the “work” by itself. Objective in this context does not mean better or more factual; it simply means that the critic judges a work’s merit based on criteria internal to the literary “object” itself. Here there is no discussion of nature, the author’s background, or the impact on an audience. Rather the objective critic analyzes a work as a self-enclosed reality that can’t be subsumed under any reference outside the work, analyzing it as a universe unto itself and using the purely literary tools of plot, character, setting, etc.

Abrams’ distinctions between critical perspectives on literature may just aid us in figuring out how to begin thinking about the text to sermon process of biblical preaching in an age of methodological pluralism. Both biblical studies and homiletics have become diverse fields with many different kinds of approaches. Perhaps it would make sense to consider whether certain biblical critics and homiletical theorists share a similar critical angle of vision, or hermeneutical stance, about their respective tasks.

An Adaptation of Abrams’ Typology: Hermeneutical Stances for Biblical Preaching

By adapting Abrams’ schema, one can envision a typology that would more closely approximate critical options available to exegetes and preachers alike:



It will be necessary to consider each of these in turn in order to draw some brief connections between the biblical scholars and preachers who represent each stance.²⁵

The World Behind the Text

The focus here is on (1) identifying how to understand a given biblical text with respect to a world outside it and (2) connecting that “text within a world” to a “sermon within our world”

²⁵ By the change in terminology from universe to “world” and artist to “mind,” I wish to signal that what follows here departs significantly from Abrams’ project. The reasons for such divergences will also become clearer as we begin to explore the *theological* bases of such interpretive interests toward the end of this article.

by some sort of analogy between them.²⁶ Under “world” one might group most (though not all) forms of biblical criticism that focus on historical context, social world (including form criticism with its interest in the *Sitz im Leben*), or anthropology. On the preaching side of the table, one would look for homiletical approaches that tend to operate on the basis of a kind of historical analogy between ancient and modern worlds. Contemporary North American homiletical representatives of this world behind the text orientation might include Stephen Farris and Paul Scott Wilson.²⁷ In actuality, however, this stance would be represented by any preaching and exegetical approach mindful of the distinction of “worlds” that Krister Stendahl has described so aptly:

Thereby a radically new stage was set for Biblical interpretation. The question of meaning was split up in two tenses: “What *did* it mean?” and “What *does* it mean?” These questions were now kept apart long enough for the descriptive task to be considered in its own right.²⁸

The Mind of the Text

The shared focus for “the mind of the text” is (1) on a mind that either produced the text or is portrayed in the text and (2) a mind or point of view that is thematized in the sermon.²⁹ Various forms of biblical criticism that could help get at this “mind” include redaction criticism (which focuses on the theology of the redactor), historical criticism that focuses specifically on the author or person of a biblical text (e.g., who was Paul? What was the faith of Jesus?), forms of literary criticism that focus on character and the development of character, or psychological criticism. The common thread among these diverse biblical approaches is an interest in a form of subjectivity or mind that produced or is portrayed inside the text. For preachers who operate out of this perspective, the key to a good sermon is an available subjectivity offers the possibility of faith. “If Paul can trust God in the face of imprisonment,” one might preach, “we, too, can trust God in the face of our own captivities in life.” Some preaching representatives of this point of view might be Henry Mitchell, Charles Rice, or Richard Thulin who sometimes focus on the personality of the preacher and his/her story or the personality of a biblical character or writer.³⁰

²⁶ In the case of the “world behind the text” I have defined Abrams’ “universe” quite a bit more narrowly—and this for reasons of the unique developments in a few centuries of modern biblical criticism as opposed to a couple millennia of literary criticism.

²⁷ Preachers may wish to consult in particular the following two works: Stephen Farris, *Preaching That Matters: The Bible and Our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) and Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999). While there is more to their work than finding an analogy between the world of the Bible and our world, this distinction is nonetheless foundational for them.

²⁸ Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Vol. I; G. A. Buttrick, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 419.

²⁹ My second variation on Abrams’ categories, “the mind of the text,” is construed more broadly than Abrams’ “artist,” who is understood more or less exclusively and externally as the actual author of a given literary work.

³⁰ Representative works are Henry Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); Charles L. Rice, “The Preacher’s Story” in *Preaching the Story* (Eds. E. Steimle, M. J. Niedenthal, and C. L. Rice; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 19-36; and Richard L. Thulin, *The “I” of the Sermon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Again, there is more to their works than just this issue. However, a focus on personal subjectivity is a common thread among them, and naturally unites them with Biblical scholars who think about texts in similar sorts of ways.

The Audience of the Text

Here biblical scholars and preachers share a focus on how this text might impact an audience, whether ancient or modern. Biblical scholars who operate from this stance tend to be practitioners of rhetorical- and certain literary-critical approaches to the Bible: rhetorical criticism, reader-response criticism, ideological approaches, and many forms of post-modern criticism. On the homiletical side, one would look for preachers who focus primarily on the impact of the interpretation of the biblical text on hearers. Here the works of homileticians David Buttrick and Thomas Long come to mind, although any perspective that understands the sermon in terms of its impact on hearers would do.³¹

The Text Unto Itself

With this approach matters deemed external to the text are no longer the focus. Biblical critics who share this focus typically use methods such as composition criticism, certain forms of canonical criticism, and the literary-critical school known as the “New Criticism.” On the homiletical side, any preacher who tends to think that other approaches to the text fail to let “scripture interpret us” may well gravitate toward this approach. Many, but not all, neo-Barthian preachers fall into this grouping whose chief homiletical representatives in North America today are likely Mark Ellingsen and Charles Campbell.³²

A Frame for Locating Types of Biblical Preaching: Theologies of Revelation

The reader may have noticed while surveying the above methods of exegesis and preaching with the adaptation of the categories in Abrams’ triangle above, that the descriptions occasionally strayed into theological territory. Despite the likely protestations from many biblical scholars, this surfacing of theological matters is no accident.

Yet homiletic theory also needs to come clean. Preaching is not just another way of analyzing biblical texts (though it is that, too) for the sake of homiletical invention, it has profoundly theological tasks and orientations. While a historical exegete of scripture does not have to profess certain theological views to do legitimate history, preachers do. The task of preaching is a theological one. So let us reflect theologically about what we have found thus far.

Each of the above perspectives about the relationship of interpretation to text embodies more than a hermeneutical stance; it embodies a certain set of theological commitments. To speak of the need to understand a text historically in order for preachers to draw useful historical analogies in their preaching is more than just a scientific operation, it is a theological one. Thus, the theological presupposition of preachers who find hermeneutical partners among biblical scholars committed to understanding the text in its relation to its historical world is that God somehow “reveals” Godself in such historical moments. Similarly, the theological presupposition

³¹ Two works to consider here are David G. Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) and Thomas G. Long’s earlier work, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989).

³² Readers may wish to consider Mark Ellingsen’s work, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) or Charles Campbell’s *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Ellingsen is especially interested in drawing the connections between exegetical practice and homiletical work.

of a preacher who gravitates toward critical methods of biblical study that focus on “the mind of the text” is that God is revealed not so much “out there, and back then” in history, but “in here” in my own subjective awareness. Preachers here need to know what Paul thought or felt so that hearers can relate somehow to the subjective faith made available now through the presumably revelatory moment that is proclamation.

These are just two examples, yet they are sufficient to show something significant. The starting point for determining which biblical scholars and critical approaches are most suited for an individual preacher’s work at the start of the process of homiletical exegesis is, surprisingly, that preacher’s theology of revelation. In other words, knowing one’s own theology of revelation, that is, what a preacher really thinks God is up to in preaching, that is the crucial starting point for the whole text to sermon process.³³

In his book *Models of Revelation* the American Roman Catholic systematic theologian Avery Dulles describes five different models for this crucial doctrine: revelation as doctrine, history, inner-experience, dialectical presence, and new awareness.³⁴ Although his first “doctrinal” model finds no clear partner in the typology, the other four models of revelation as history (the world behind the text), inner-experience (the mind of the text), new awareness (the audience of the text), and dialectical presence (the text unto itself) correspond in intriguing ways to the hermeneutical stances identified above for methods of biblical criticism and homiletics. The goal of this theological framing, however, is not a rigid compartmentalization, but the offer of an opportunity to use the typology heuristically to deepen the relationship of theology to preaching and to exegesis engaged with a homiletical aim. Drawing the connection to Dulles’ important work also invites preachers to pursue the question at the level of a systematic theology as well. In other words, preachers who identify a “working” theology of revelation in their exegetical or preaching commitments may want to reflect on how it relates both to practices and other theological loci.

Conclusion

Perhaps then those who wish to preach biblically and those who are charged to educate them theologically should begin the so-called “text to sermon” process by being honest with themselves and ask the important prior theological question: how does God seek to reveal Godself through preaching?

- Does God reveal Godself as the God who does “mighty acts in history” both back then and now?
- Or is this God the One who meets biblical authors, historical figures, or individual characters in their inmost subjectivities and thus transforms one’s point of view?
- Or is God revealed as One who impacts *hearers’* awareness of who they are in the world (audience)?

³³ Homiletician John McClure identified an analogous deep connection in his work on the relationship of his “four scriptural codes” to their corresponding models of revelation in *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), 48ff. In doing so, McClure also links these to an earlier form of Avery Dulles’ work in “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 41 (March 1980), 52-57. While my reliance on Abrams’ typology moves me in different directions both materially and methodologically as I relate that typology to Dulles’ later work, our two perspectives clearly underline the importance of thinking theologically through scriptural “orientations.” This is the nature of the invitation to further systematic reflection that this study both implies and issues to preachers and homileticians alike.

³⁴ Avery Dulles, S. J., *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 36-114.

- Or rather does this God’s manifestation in this text as authoritative object trump all historical understanding, personal subjectivities, and shared realities in consciousness?

The phrasing of these theological issues as questions is quite intentional. If preachers are to benefit from the heuristic value of this typology, they need to inventory their own preaching and determine what their working theologies of revelation are.³⁵ In doing so, however, they will find it impossible to engage the exegetical process merely as recipients of others’ insights (nor will they fail to see the connections to other theological commitments systematically). Instead, realizing that their goal-oriented criteria for exegesis are not solely matters for technical reason, let alone personal preference and taste, but are derived ultimately from a theology of revelation which not only deepens their preaching, but grounds and guides the homiletical and exegetical choices they make, they will—as preachers—function as theologians themselves.

In the end, this could also make preachers’ exegetical efforts more fruitful. The exegetical process need not driven by methods of the biblical guild, but it can be helped by them when a theological orientation and the goal-specific criteria that arise out of that theology engage the process of exegesis actively, instead of receiving its results passively. In other words, there is still a path for biblical preaching from text to sermon. But it begins, as Farley has intimated, at the end of another path: the one from theology to the text.³⁶

³⁵ Theologian Burton Z. Cooper and homiletician John S. McClure have encouraged such general theological profiling for preachers in *Claiming Theology in the Pulpit* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

³⁶ The inversion here of the normal “text to sermon” point of view is not about substituting a new starting point. It identifies in part the circularity of the theological enterprise: our reading of texts can and does affect our theology; and our theology can and does shape the ways in which we engage texts in light of our work as preachers. For more about this hermeneutical, theological “spiral,” see the work I did with systematic theologian Robert Allen Kelly in *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 37-38