

Jared E. Alcántara. *How to Preach Proverbs*. Preaching Biblical Literature. Dallas: Fontes Press. 2022. 202 pages. \$19.95.

Let me begin with confession, an appropriately religious thing to do. I have never preached a single sermon based on the book of Proverbs. I have preached in over a thousand churches in nearly every state and in more than twenty foreign countries over more than fifty years, yet have never based any of my thousands of proclamations on that particular book. I even had a colleague, Alyce McKenzie, for the final years of my teaching ministry at Perkins School of Theology, who has spent much of her scholarly life probing the book of Proverbs, but apparently little of her very fine work rubbed off on me.

I was far too enamored of the sparkling narrative traditions of the Hebrew Bible, focusing most of my scholarly energies there. As I look back on my preaching ministry, it is clear to me that I needed to take more seriously this portion of the scriptures, its admonitions and rich theological insights. In short, I needed Alcántara's book, which I find to be a useful and valuable introduction to this literature for the pulpit. (Of course, I could also have taken with more seriousness Alyce's 1996 *Preaching Proverbs*!) Any preacher who wishes to expand her repertoire of biblical materials might well take up McKenzie's earlier book and this newer one from Alcántara.

Though McKenzie and Alcántara cover the same biblical material, they do so in rather different ways. Alcántara, Paul W. Powell Chair of Preaching at Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, divides his biblical and homiletical analysis into seven chapters, each one emphasizing a different characteristic of the proverbial material. These include: genre studies, imagery, characters, themes, timing, integrity, and justice. From these studies he suggests seven strategies for sermons, informed by the seven characteristics. The strategies do not always fit easily within their correlated characteristic—some seem a bit forced—but each characteristic and each strategy holds important aids for a preacher searching Proverbs for homiletical gold.

I applaud the chapter on justice (129–150). One of the dangers of preaching from Proverbs is the distinct possibility of falling into the trap of haranguing. “Do this, but do not do that” makes up a huge portion of proverbial literature and how easy it is to preach a sermon that takes up that verbal stance! Such admonitions are less preaching the gospel of God than offering speeches about correct and incorrect human behavior. Alcántara warns us away from that danger, bidding us never to forget that we must regularly preach using a “prophetic tone,” grounding whatever we say in God's call to speak truth to power, to move beyond advice toward community-building in God. This insight helps me to see how Proverbs can offer far more than generalized human advice; it can move a preacher toward the central concerns of justice for all God's people.

That said, I found the three sermons in the book's appendix rather disappointing. Alcántara's own, “Street Smarts” (165–175), was the best example of the three to illustrate more exactly how his analysis of Proverbs could be played out in actual proclamation. The genre, images, and themes were clearly stated and interestingly fleshed out. The second, Ralph Douglas West's “Wisdom for Times of Uncertainty,” based on Prov 30:24–28 (176–190), demonstrates again how hard it is to experience a written sermon in the Black Church tradition as opposed to hearing it preached. Still, I found the sermon difficult to follow, and stretched over some 14 pages, a bit overstuffed with ideas not always made clear. The final sermon, Ingrid Faro's “Proverbs 31” (191–202), was to me the weakest of the three, rather ill-focused, not a good example of what Alcántara offers to us in his helpful analyses in the bulk of the book.

Here we find a very good introductory book on ways to enter the world of biblical proverbs and employ them for proclamation. I found the book eminently useful and commend it to you if you are after ways to expand your biblical range into material both rich and insightful, yet little heard in pulpits. Perhaps it is not too late even for me to dip a toe into these homiletical waters. I am grateful to Alcántara for giving us his important insights into the book of Proverbs and the wonderful value they may have for our preaching. This volume appears to be the first of a series, *Preaching Biblical Literature*. One can only hope that future volumes will equal this one as important aids to faithful biblical proclamation.

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