



Introduction

Some of the hard texts are hard because they are difficult to understand, others are hard because they represent points of view at odds with our conventional wisdom or with other parts of Scriptures, and still others are hard because they demand too much of us.

Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*¹

I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT, AND IN FACT TAUGHT, THAT IF WE have some problem with a passage in the Old Testament, it is not the Bible's problem. It is ours. The Old Testament has been handed down to us in the church as a priceless treasure. In it, our Israelite forebears in the faith have preserved for us some eighteen hundred years of their witness to what the one God has said and done in their lives. Through their faithful testimony, the Holy One of Israel who is at the same time the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has revealed himself. Through the words of his historians and prophets, psalmists and wisdom teachers, priests and lawgivers, God has formed our faith, instructed our piety in proper reverence and awe, awakened our expectations of his working, and bent our wills to his desires and goals. Apart from the Old Testament, we do not know who the Father of Jesus Christ is nor do we know who we are as "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16).²

Introduction

So we have to preach from the Old Testament. For some preachers, constructing a sermon from any portion of this two-thirds of our canon is a problem, because they have not read and studied the Old Testament and therefore do not know it. They approach it with all of the usual stereotypes—that the Old Testament is a legalistic book, that its God is not a loving Father but only a God of wrath, that its theology and worship are primitive and outdated, that its truths have been superseded by the “higher spiritual truths” of the New Testament. None of these stereotypes is valid, and those who preach them are not preaching the gospel.

Such ignorant assessments of the Old Testament are not our principle concern in this book, however. Rather, even for those of us who preach regularly from the Old Testament and who could not do without it, as the church for two thousand years has said it cannot do without it, there are passages in the Old Testament that give us trouble.

Barbara Taylor wrote a wonderful article some years ago about her experience of being asked to address a senior citizens’ group on “Women in the Old Testament.” She told them the stories about Jael who drove a tent peg through Sisera’s temple and about Esther who won permission for the Jews to destroy seventy-five thousand of their enemies. “They thanked me very much,” Taylor said, “and have never asked me back.”³

Such stories and many others in the Old Testament do not fit with our views of God. This is where the difficulty arises. God does things and says things in the Old Testament accounts that we do not like, just as Jesus does and says similarly unsavory things in the New Testament.⁴ We preachers too, for all of our knowledge of the Scriptures, have stereotypes of God, and if his deeds and words do not match those preformed views, we reject or ignore them. We are very good at excising or omitting passages in the Old Testament that we cannot countenance. We form a “canon within the canon” and preach only that with which we agree.

As stated above, however, the difficulties that we encounter with parts of the Old Testament are not the Old

Introduction

Testament's problems. They are ours. We are required to wrestle with these difficult texts until we can come to some peace with them. We are not to bring our views of God to the texts; rather, we are to attempt to let the texts shape our views of God and his working. As Karl Barth wrote,

The gospel is not in our thoughts or hearts; it is in Scripture. The dearest habits and best insights that I have—I must give them all up before listening. I must not use them to protect myself against the breakthrough of a knowledge that derives from Scripture. Again and again I must let myself be contradicted. I must let myself be loosened up. I must be able to surrender everything.⁵

This book, therefore, is an attempt at wrestling, at surrendering, at letting some of the difficult passages of the Old Testament have their way with us preachers.

Obviously, this little volume cannot treat all of the texts over which faithful preachers stumble. Every preacher has his or her own list. Rather it deals only with selected texts from which preachers might possibly write sermons. Please keep this in mind if a text is omitted that you feel should have been dealt with. My husband facetiously recommended that I deal with the brief story in 2 Kgs 2:23–24 of the two she-bears mauling the little boys who made fun of the prophet Elisha. While the story is a folktale reflecting the popular fear of prophetic men of God, I pointed out that no one was going to preach on it, not even to stand up for bald-headed men!

Some effort has been made to take account of the three-year common lectionary⁶ and to deal with those stated Old Testament texts that might possibly give preachers difficulty. But many nonlectionary texts are treated as well. Even a three-year lectionary can specify only a limited number of Old Testament passages, and there are many others that have been largely ignored but that should be preached if the congregation is to hear “the whole counsel of God.”

The exposition of some texts in this work can be applied to other Old Testament passages. For example, the chapter on “The LORD Is a Man of War” from Exod 15 contains some thoughts about God's destruction of his enemies that can

Introduction

apply to similar militaristic texts. Likewise, the treatment of Jeremiah's prophetic action in Jer 13 contains a discussion that applies to most prophetic symbolic actions. The exposition of God's use of natural catastrophes (Amos 4:4–13) may throw some light on other texts dealing with God's use of the natural world. And much of the treatment of the Day of the Lord in Zeph 1:14–18 applies to other texts dealing with that fateful day.

I omit discussions of some passages because I do not want to repeat what I have written in other books. For example, I have a full treatment of the Book of Jonah and of Hos 2:14–23 in my volume *Minor Prophets I*,⁷ just as I fully expound Gen 3:1–24 in *Preaching Biblical Texts*.⁸ In similar vein, the Book of Zechariah is full of preachable texts, especially in its vision sections, but I have dealt with these in my commentary *Nahum–Malachi*⁹ in the Interpretation commentary series. There are some repeated discussions in this book, however, of the Holy War and the holiness of God made necessary by the treatment of individual texts.

The translation of the Old Testament used is that of the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. While the marketeers have striven mightily to replace the widely-used RSV with the New Revised Standard Version, and while that latter properly uses inclusive language for human beings, many scholars have found fault with the NRSV in its rendering of the original Hebrew. Similarly, after having written a commentary employing the New International Version (NIV)¹⁰ that is so widely used among conservatives, I have concluded that probably the RSV is still the most faithful—and most beautiful—rendering of the original Hebrew of the Old Testament.

Notes

1. *Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Morrow, 1996), 74.

2. For a full discussion, see my book *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

3. "Preaching the Terrors," *Journal for Preachers* 15 (2, 1992): 3.

Introduction

4. See *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by John T. and James R. Carroll (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996). After publishing that volume, Hendrickson Publishers asked me to write this one about the Old Testament.

5. Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 78.

6. The three-year revised common lectionary is the list of biblical texts that have been designated for each Sunday of the church year by the ecumenical Consultation on Common Texts. It includes both Old and New Testament texts to be used over a period of three years. It is used by many churches, especially those that have a more liturgical service.

7. New International Biblical Commentary. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996.

8. *Preaching Biblical Texts: Expositions by Jewish and Christian Scholars* (ed. Fredrick C. Holmgren and Herman E. Schaalman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1–10.

9. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta: John Knox, 1986.

10. *Minor Prophets I*.