

# The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative



**Steven D. Mathewson**

Second Edition

# The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative

**Steven D. Mathewson**

*Foreword by* **Haddon W. Robinson**

**B**

**Baker Academic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 2nd ed.

Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2021

Used by permission.

# Contents

Illustrations	xi
Foreword to the First Edition <i>by Haddon W. Robinson</i>	xiii
Preface	xv
Acknowledgments	xix

## **Part 1 Preparing to Preach**

1. The Challenge of Preaching Old Testament Narratives 3
2. The Christ-Centered Preaching Debate 15

## **Part 2 From Text to Concept**

3. The Journey Begins 29
4. A is for Action 41
5. C is for Characters 65
6. T is for Talking 75
7. S is for Setting 81
8. Drawing Conclusions 87

## **Part 3 From Concept to Sermon**

9. Starting the Second Half of the Adventure 107
10. Adding the Finishing Touches 121

11. Shaping the Sermon	127
12. Outlining the Sermon	137
13. Mastering the Storyteller's Craft	147
14. Entering and Exiting	165
15. Delivering the Goods	171
Appendix A: Sample Sermon on Judges 17–18	179
Appendix B: Using Hebrew in Narrative Exegesis	193
Appendix C: Commentaries for Narrative Exegesis	221
Bibliography	229
Scripture Index	243
Subject Index	246

# Illustrations

## **Discourse Layouts**

- B.1 Genesis 38 (Hebrew) 208
- B.2 Genesis 38 (ESV) 211
- B.3 Joshua 1 (Hebrew) 215
- B.4 Joshua 1 (ESV) 216

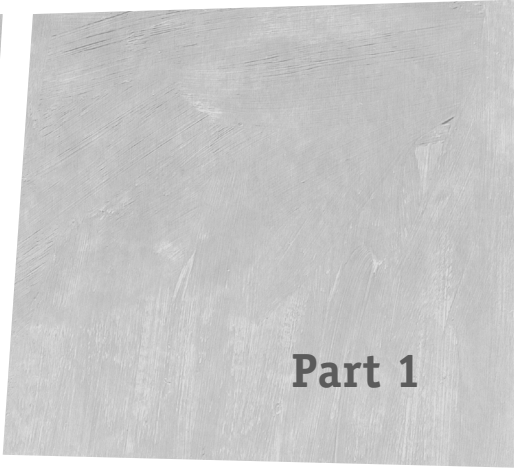
## **Figures**

- 9.1 The Process of Application 116
- 11.1 Types of Reasoning 129

## **Tables**

- 1.1 Robinson's Stages of Sermon Preparation 13
- 4.1 Elements in the Plot 43
- 4.2 Ryken's List of Plot Motifs 47
- 4.3 Culley's List of Action Sequences 49
- 4.4 Narrated (Actual) Time vs. Narration Time 53
- 4.5 Points of View 56
- 4.6 Indicators of Shifts in Focalization 57
- 4.7 Three Types of Irony 58

- 4.8 Dorsey’s Chiastic Structure of Judges 3–16 61
- 4.9 Fokkelman’s Chiastic Structure of Genesis 11:1–9 62
- 5.1 Types of Characters in Old Testament Stories 66
- 5.2 Character Classification in Genesis 38 67
- 8.1 A Summary of Features to Examine in Old Testament Narratives 88
- 8.2 Works on Old Testament Narrative Literature 89
- 8.3 Components of a Big Idea 91
- 8.4 Expressions of the Big Idea 94
- 8.5 Range of Possibilities for Making an Element Timeless (2 Sam. 11–12) 98
- 10.1 Big Idea Development in Genesis 13 124
- 12.1 Tips for Effective Outlines 138
- 14.1 Marks of an Effective Introduction 166
- 15.1 Preparing to Preach without Notes 172
- B.1 Notations Used in Discourse Analysis 196
- B.2 A Clause Taxonomy for Biblical Hebrew Narrative 197
- B.3 A Color Scheme for Verb Identification 206



Part 1

# Preparing to Preach



# 1

## The Challenge of Preaching Old Testament Narratives

People crave stories. Just watch folks sitting in an airline terminal waiting to catch a flight. Several are reading novels by the likes of Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, C. J. Box, or Marilynne Robinson—whether on a Kindle reader or in a hardback edition. Some of the passengers with earbuds are listening to biographies of Michelle Obama or Melania Trump. Another passenger fastens his eyes to his tablet, watching one of the three movies based on J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy-adventure novel, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Other people tell stories or listen to someone tell them. A thirty-something mom tells her sister about a run-in with her son’s fifth-grade teacher. A cluster of business professionals listen to a CEO describe how her company survived the economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic. A college student is on his phone, providing a friend with an animated account of a scene in the latest *Star Wars* movie.

When preachers open up the text of Scripture each Sunday morning, they speak to listeners whose “hearts traffic in stories.” Indeed, our “very orientation to the world is fundamentally shaped by stories.”<sup>1</sup> This is because “stories plant ideas and emotions into a listener’s brain.”<sup>2</sup> Yes,

1. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 108.

2. Gallo, *Talk Like TED*, 49.



listeners unknowingly get their theology from the stories they consume during the week. How does a preacher address boomers shaped by the “sermons” conveyed via news stories on Fox News or CNN? How does a Bible expositor communicate to millennials who come to church with scenes from a Netflix original dancing in their heads? How does a minister of the Gospel relate God’s truth to the fourteen-year-olds who have fed on the sermons preached to them by the “stories” contained in their social media accounts?

The sheer number of stories in the Old Testament seems to give preachers an edge. According to the most conservative estimates, stories account for 30 to 40 percent of the Old Testament. Preachers can cash in on the stories of David, Ruth, Samson, and Jezebel when they stand before their video-saturated, story-driven congregations.<sup>3</sup> Theologian R. C. Sproul once said, “I’m big on preaching from narratives because people will listen ten times as hard to a story as they will to an abstract lesson.”<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as it seems. Preachers often neglect Old Testament narratives or, like beginners playing the saxophone, preach them poorly. Neither problem says much about our reverence for God’s Word, let alone about our love for the people to whom God has called us to preach. As journalist Terry Mattingly observes, “Most people hear academic lectures at church, then turn to mass media to find inspiring tales of heroes and villains, triumph and tragedy, sin and redemption, heaven and hell.”<sup>5</sup>

Preachers who take Scripture seriously must do better. Venerable preaching professor Haddon Robinson argues, “Anyone who loves the Bible must value the story, for whatever else the Bible is, it is a book of stories. Old Testament theology comes packaged in narratives of men and women who go running off to set up their handmade gods, and of others who take God seriously enough to bet their lives on Him.”<sup>6</sup> Evangelicals have taken Old Testament stories seriously enough to defend their historicity. Now

3. As long ago as 1995, David L. Larsen argued, “This is the milieu and matrix for the explosive rebirth and renewal of interest in the story, a rekindling that has reached and powerfully shaken the world of Christian communication as well. Good storytellers are gurus in our society” (*Telling the Old*, 14–15). One wonders if preachers have made progress since then in capitalizing on the power of stories and storytellers.

4. Dudit, “Theology and Preaching in the 90s,” 23.

5. Mattingly, “Star Wars.”

6. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 90.

it's time to learn to preach them effectively. While this volume focuses on Old Testament stories, readers can apply much of it to the stories in the Gospels and Acts.<sup>7</sup>

### **A Commitment to Expository Preaching**

I am writing primarily for preachers who are committed to expository preaching. I want to help them do exposition in Old Testament narrative literature. By “expository preaching,” I refer to preaching that exposes the meaning of a text of Scripture and applies that meaning to the lives of the hearers. Two well-known preaching professors supply helpful definitions.

An expository sermon may be defined as a message whose structure and thought are developed from a biblical text, covering its scope, in order to explain how the features and context of the text disclose enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended by the Spirit, who inspired the text. (Bryan Chapell)<sup>8</sup>

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers. (Haddon Robinson)<sup>9</sup>

When people finish listening to an expository sermon, they should understand the author's meaning and should even be able to track the development of the author's thought in the text. They should also have some idea of what the truth will look like fleshed out in their lives. Listeners who hear expository preaching week after week will get to think through books and major blocks of text. They will learn how to read the Scriptures for themselves, following the argument of a particular text. While a series of expository sermons may cover assorted passages on a particular theme, expositors generally work through individual books of the Bible or major sections in those books. The payoffs are tremendous.

7. However, there are issues unique to the Gospels. Preachers will do well to consult a source like Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, and J. Brown, *Gospels as Stories*.

8. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 8–9.

9. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 5.

As Tim Keller notes, expository preaching “expresses and unleashes our belief in the whole Bible as God’s authoritative, living, and active Word.”<sup>10</sup>

At its core, expository preaching is more of a philosophy than a method. That is, it amounts to a set of commitments or convictions rather than a particular method. Let me share a couple of convictions that expositors must bring to the task. Without these convictions, they are likely to pursue methods that sell short their efforts. While these convictions apply to preaching from any literary genre in the Bible, they are especially critical to preaching from Old Testament narratives.

1. *Exposition is more than an exegetical lecture.* A few expositors to whom I have listened seem to equate exposition with backing up the exegetical dump truck and unloading its contents on their congregations. They may even offer a running commentary on the text without any sense of unity. Hearers who exalt this style frequently describe it as “verse-by-verse teaching.” Often, such hearers come from preaching-deficient backgrounds. They are so starved for God’s Word that they are willing to receive raw data. They love baskets of exegetical nuggets, and they want preaching that squeezes every ounce of insight out of a Greek or Hebrew term. With this style of preaching, preachers can go until time runs out. It doesn’t matter if they quit at verse 4, verse 7, or verse 16. There is no development of a flow of thought—simply a litany of exegetical insights.

Richard Mayhue clarifies that expository preaching “is not a commentary running from word to word and verse to verse without unity, outline, and pervasive drive.” Furthermore, “it is not pure exegesis, no matter how scholarly, if it lacks a theme, thesis, outline, and development.”<sup>11</sup>

While this approach hampers effective preaching of any literary genre in Scripture, it especially damns the preaching of Old Testament narratives. Stories unfold. Their ideas take time to develop and gel. Furthermore, their ideas may not be as highly concentrated as in other types of literature. In Old Testament narrative, it may take an entire chapter before the theological message of the text emerges. Colossians 3:1–11 is a great choice for a sermon text. Genesis 38:1–11 is not. The former text tells believers how to live as those who have been raised with Christ. However, the first eleven verses of Genesis 38 only provide the background necessary for understanding the story.

10. Keller, *Preaching*, 35.

11. Mayhue, “Rediscovering Expository Preaching,” 10.

Another unfortunate side effect of reducing exposition to an exegetical lecture is a failure to engage the heart. According to Tim Keller, the neglect of persuasion or illustration or other ways to affect the heart may come “from an inaccurate reading of Paul’s warnings in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 against using ‘human wisdom’ in preaching.” This neglect makes for preaching that is boring and unfaithful to the very purpose of preaching.<sup>12</sup>

2. *There is no form inherent in expository preaching.* Richard Mayhue is on target when he writes, “Exposition is not so much defined by the form of the message as it is by the source and process through which the message was formed.”<sup>13</sup> To put it another way, there is no such thing as an expository sermon form. Ideally, the form should come from the text. As Sidney Greidanus argues, an expository sermon should let the biblical text provide clues for shaping the sermon.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, expositors who work in Old Testament narratives need to adjust their style and even discard the captioned survey approach (e.g., I. Abraham’s Test, II. Abraham’s Obedience, III. Abraham’s Reward). We often pan this as the “three points and a poem” method. This style ends up working against rather than for the preacher who employs it when preaching a Bible story. We will return to this problem later in the chapter.

## Why We Struggle with Old Testament Stories

Faithful preachers who may shine in Ephesians often preach poorly in 1 Samuel. Why do we struggle to preach Old Testament stories? Answering this question will help us get back on track. It will reveal areas that need adjustment. Several factors contribute to our poor performance in the pulpit when we open Scripture to an Old Testament narrative.

1. *We view stories as fluff.* Many churches teach Bible stories to children downstairs in the basement while the adults study Paul’s epistles upstairs in the auditorium.<sup>15</sup> Wesley Kort explains why we often sell narrative short:

Generally we hold narrative to be optional, to be a matter of taste rather than of necessity. We may even disdain narrative as a form of discourse

12. Keller, *Preaching*, 42.

13. Mayhue, “Rediscovering Expository Preaching,” 11.

14. Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, 18–20.

15. For a discussion of this problem, see Thomas, “Old Testament ‘Folk Canon,’” 45–62.

more suited for children than for adults or more for ancient and otherwise underdeveloped people than for the educated and sophisticated. As modern and enlightened adults we have the strength to view our world as it is without the illusions and comforts of narrative wholes. We have little patience for narrative and are tempted to press for an enumeration of facts or a set of clearly and sharply formulated ideas.<sup>16</sup>

However, as N. T. Wright argues, “stories are one of the most basic modes of human life.” They do not exist simply to illustrate a point. Wright says, “Stories are often wrongly regarded as a poor person’s substitute for the ‘real thing,’ which is to be found either in some abstract truth or in statements about ‘bare facts.’”<sup>17</sup> In fact, J. De Waal Dryden observes that a growing number of Old Testament scholars recognize “the strong wisdom agendas incorporated in these [Old Testament] narratives.”<sup>18</sup>

As a result, Eugene Peterson challenges pastors who look down on stories: “Why is the story so often dismissed as not quite adult? Why, among earnest pastors, is the story looked down upon as not quite serious? It is ignorance, mostly. The story is the most adult form of language, the most serious form into which language can be put. Among pastors, who have particular responsibilities for keeping the words of Scripture active in the mind and memory of the faith communities, an appreciation for the story in which Scripture comes to us is imperative.”<sup>19</sup>

2. *We get frustrated by the subtlety of narrative.* Old Testament narratives make their point in a subtle way. They typically “show” us rather than “tell” us. This indirect approach frustrates those who want a text to state its point in a direct way. Haddon Robinson asks, “Why didn’t God just come right out and say what he meant and not beat around the bush with stories?”<sup>20</sup> This subtlety tends to lead to subjectivity. As Charles Dickson notes, “Interpreters perceive structures in narratives, episodes, and narrative units that are not supported by the text; they see structures in the text that are not there.”<sup>21</sup>

16. Kort, *Story, Text, and Scripture*, 12–13.

17. N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 38.

18. Dryden, *Hermeneutic of Wisdom*, 101.

19. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 119.

20. Robinson, “Heresy of Application,” 310.

21. Dickson, *From Story Interpretation*, 239.

3. *We minimize the role of Old Testament stories in the canon.* In the past, some Bible expositors turned to the Old Testament and its narratives only for illustrations of new covenant truth.<sup>22</sup> However, David C. Deuel offers a needed corrective:

Using Old Testament narrative *only* to illustrate New Testament teaching, however, results in ignoring much Old Testament instruction that may serve as background for New Testament theology, or else as teaching not repeated in the New Testament. Creation, law, and covenant are in Old Testament narrative which, if ignored or used for illustrations only, will create many problems of biblical imbalance. An adequate theological framework must include the whole Old Testament (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture . . .”).<sup>23</sup>

Iain Provan concurs when he says, “All historiography is also in some sense ideological literature. That is, any story about the past involves selection and interpretation by authors intent on persuading their readership in some way.”<sup>24</sup>

More recently, influential pastor Andy Stanley has asked followers of Jesus to consider “unhitching your teaching of what it means to follow Jesus from all things old covenant,” including its narratives, for the sake of the next generation’s faith.<sup>25</sup> He claims that when we “anchor our story to an old covenant narrative and worldview, we lose our case in the marketplace. . . . In the real world. The world where science is gospel and folks are growing more and more skeptical of all things religious.” Not only that, we end up with “the prosperity gospel, the crusades, anti-Semitism, legalism, exclusivism, judgmentalism,” and all sorts of “isms.”<sup>26</sup> However, it is completely unacceptable for believers to unhitch their Christian faith from the Bible Jesus read. There is a better way to address Stanley’s

22. For example, see MacArthur, “Frequently Asked Questions,” 341–42. Two decades later, in a sermon on Christ in the Old Testament, MacArthur suggested that preaching on Christian living from an Old Testament narrative text misses the point and spiritualizes the text given that “there are no Christians living in the Old Testament” (“Introduction to Christ”).

23. Deuel, “Expository Preaching,” 283.

24. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 8.

25. Stanley, *Irresistible*, 315. Earlier, he refers to “our incessant habit of reaching back into old covenant concepts, teachings, sayings, and narratives to support our own teachings, sayings, and narratives” (90). These “teachings” that stem from the teaching of the old covenant include all sorts of bizarre behaviors or judgmental attitudes (90–91).

26. Stanley, *Irresistible*, 158.

concerns. Brent Strawn, in *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment*, says that the way forward is to “learn the *entire* language of Scripture, Old and New Testaments *together*.”<sup>27</sup> Only then can we challenge our own misreadings of the Old Testament, as well as the “massive reductions” of its message by the New Atheists, the Marcionites (old and new), and the “happiologists” (like Joel Osteen and other representatives of the prosperity gospel).<sup>28</sup>

4. *We get intimidated by the language and literature of the Old Testament.* A fourth reason evangelicals struggle with preaching Old Testament stories is more practical: the language and literature of the New Testament seem more manageable. Choosing New Testament studies over Old Testament studies resembles a citizen of the United States specializing in United States history instead of the history of Western civilization. With United States history, there’s a smaller body of material to learn, and it’s more familiar. A college Greek professor explained to me that he pursued graduate studies in New Testament language and exegesis because there was too much to master in Old Testament studies. The sheer size of the Old Testament, the length of Old Testament history, and his difficulty in learning Hebrew steered him toward the New Testament. Evangelical seminaries reinforce this problem when they require fewer hours in Hebrew grammar and exegesis courses than in Greek grammar and exegesis courses. Fortunately, the easiest reading in the Hebrew Bible resides in its narrative sections. That’s why first-year Hebrew students often begin reading the book of Ruth within a few weeks. Appendix B will help preachers ease back into the world of Biblical Hebrew and use it with profit.

5. *We get enslaved to a particular style of exposition.* A final reason why preachers struggle with Old Testament stories is enslavement to a particular homiletical method. Don Wardlaw argues, “When preachers feel they have not preached a passage of Scripture unless they have dissected and rearranged that Word into a lawyer’s brief, they in reality make the Word of God subservient to one particular, technical kind of reason.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Fred Craddock encourages preachers who want to stand at the

27. Strawn, *Old Testament Is Dying*, 225 (emphasis original).

28. See Strawn, *Old Testament Is Dying*, 131, as well as chaps. 4–6 in Strawn’s volume for a more detailed discussion of each of these “massive reductions.”

29. Wardlaw, “Introduction,” 16.

threshold of new pulpit power to ask “why the Gospel should always be impaled upon the frame of Aristotelian logic.”<sup>30</sup>

As previously noted, some evangelicals preach through an Old Testament narrative text by using the captioned survey form. Basically, this sermon develops through the points of an analytical outline. Usually, the preacher will state these points prominently so listeners leave the sermon with an outline in their minds or at least on paper. For example, the sermon I preached several years ago on 1 Samuel 7 chewed its way through the following outline:

- I. The Repentance of God’s People (7:2–6)
  - A. The determination to seek the Lord (v. 2)
  - B. The decree to put away idols (vv. 3–4)
  - C. The decision to offer confession (vv. 5–6)
- II. The Victory of God’s People (7:7–11)
  - A. The Philistine advance toward Israel was frightening (v. 7)
  - B. The Israelite cry to the Lord was compelling (vv. 8–9)
  - C. The divine thunder against the Philistines was overwhelming (vv. 10–11)
- III. The Resulting Prosperity of God’s People (7:12–17)
  - A. God was worshiped (v. 12)
  - B. The enemy was subdued (v. 13a)
  - C. The land was at peace (vv. 13b–17)

The recipe for such a sermon is simple: (1) slice the text into an analytical outline; (2) season the outline points with parallelism; (3) sprinkle the points with alliteration; and (4) serve for thirty to forty-five minutes on a fill-in-the-blank outline projected on the big screens. Is this an overblown caricature? No. This approach was popular when I began pastoral ministry. More than three decades later, it has not subsided. A while ago, I checked out the website of a prominent midwestern evangelical church. Their senior pastor, a leader in his particular denomination, made his sermons available in sermon notes and in an audio format. He had been preaching through 1 Samuel, so I clicked on some of his outlines. He had

30. Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 45.



certainly mastered the analytical outline approach. One of his sermons broke down the text according to three Vs: “the *vilification* of the Lord’s glory,” “the *vindication* of the Lord’s glory,” and “the *vengeance* by the Lord’s glory.” When I listened to the sermon on audio, the preacher made each of his points prominent with statements like, “In verses 1–2, we find the vilification of the Lord’s glory,” or “Verses 3–5 describe the vindication of the Lord’s glory.”

The problem is, good storytellers do not convey their stories through analytical outlines. Veteran expositor Warren Wiersbe reminds preachers that a sermon must present biblical truth “in a manner that is reasonable, imaginative, and intrinsic to the text.”<sup>31</sup> He adds, “To preach biblically means much more than to preach the truth of the Bible accurately. It also means to present that truth the way the biblical writers and speakers presented it.”<sup>32</sup> When Stephen preached a Bible story in Acts 7, he did not organize his material in an analytical outline. This does not mean that an analytical outline sermon is categorically unbiblical. But it does suggest that an expositor is not bound to this type of sermon form even though it remains popular today in evangelical circles. The analytical outline approach presses the story into a mold that often works against it, especially when the outline points are alliterated or parallel.

## A Learning Strategy

We’re ready to start the process of building or remodeling a method for preaching Old Testament narratives. This volume will build on the methodology presented in Haddon Robinson’s classic textbook *Biblical Preaching*. Robinson breaks the task of sermon preparation into ten stages (see table 1.1). The present volume will follow the same strategy. Please do not let this deter you if you slice the pie differently. You may follow a different homiletical approach. That’s fine. You should be able to tailor the contents of this volume to fit your own process of sermon development.

Let me add another clarification. The process of developing an expository message from an Old Testament narrative text should be fluid and artistic. You must develop a feel for it. However, to learn the process you

31. Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching*, 304–5.

32. Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching*, 36.

Table 1.1

**Robinson's Stages of Sermon Preparation**

1. Selecting the Passage
2. Studying the Passage
3. Discovering the Exegetical Idea
4. Analyzing the Exegetical Idea
5. Formulating the Homiletical Idea
6. Determining the Sermon's Purpose
7. Deciding How to Accomplish This Purpose
8. Outlining the Sermon
9. Filling in the Sermon Outline
10. Preparing the Introduction and Conclusion

must break it down into its component parts. Years ago when I learned how to drive, my driver's education manual broke down a left-hand turn into twelve steps. At the time, I thought it was ridiculous. But breaking the process down helped me learn the fundamentals correctly. Learning to preach an Old Testament narrative works the same way. We have to break the process down into mechanical steps so that we can reassemble them into a fluid, artistic motion.

Finally, here's a word about studying narrative texts in Hebrew. Knowing Biblical Hebrew, or learning it, will give you an edge. Thankfully, as already noted, the easiest type of literature to read in the Hebrew Bible is narrative. So you might want to revive your Hebrew or take the plunge and learn it.<sup>33</sup> However, if you don't know Hebrew, don't panic. You can still do quality exegesis and understand what a narrative is saying and what it is doing with what it is saying.

33. I highly recommend Howell, Merkle, and Plummer, *Hebrew for Life*.

## 2

# The Christ-Centered Preaching Debate

Early in Michael Jordan’s NBA career, the Chicago Bulls coaching staff disagreed over how to run the offense. Doug Collins, the head coach, employed a keep-the-ball-in-Jordan’s-hands strategy. One of his assistants, Tex Winter, argued for a “triangle offense” that kept the ball moving from player to player. The disagreement escalated. Collins banished Winter from the bench. Finally, management fired Collins and replaced him with Phil Jackson, another assistant mentored by Winter. The rest is history. Jackson led the Bulls and their star player, Michael Jordan, to six NBA championships.

There is a debate in the field of preaching that stokes the same kind of heated disagreement. It is the debate over whether (or how) to preach Christ in the Old Testament. Your conclusions will shape the way that you study and preach an Old Testament narrative text. So it is worth thinking carefully about it before proceeding.

### **A Fascinating Controversy**

A good entry point into the debate is a controversy that raged in the Reformed churches in Holland just prior to World War II over how to preach “historical texts”—that is, Old Testament narratives. Sidney Greidanus

explored this controversy in his 1970 doctoral dissertation, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts*. Some preachers within these Dutch Reformed churches advocated an “exemplary approach,” which looked to the characters in the stories as models to imitate or avoid. Others in these same churches argued for a “redemptive-historical approach” (or “Christocentric” approach), which proclaimed how the story points forward to the person and work of Christ. Interestingly, this was an in-house disagreement.

The debate raged during the 1930s and early 1940s, but it faded soon after the German armies invaded Holland in May 1940 and occupied it until 1945. As Greidanus observes, “The disruptive influence of this occupation on the normal pattern of life was hardly conducive to carrying on the controversy.”<sup>1</sup> A fatal schism in the church toward the end of World War II kept the debate from resurfacing. Greidanus, though, revisited the controversy twenty-five years later and offered his own critique and a model for preaching the “historical texts” of the Old Testament.

### ***The Basic Arguments***

Here is a brief overview of each approach. The “exemplary approach” looked at the characters in a narrative as models to imitate or warning examples to shun.<sup>2</sup> It took its cue from three New Testament passages.<sup>3</sup> In 1 Corinthians 10, the apostle Paul cites God’s judgment on his rebellious people during their wilderness wanderings as warning “examples” (vv. 6, 11). Furthermore, as one proponent observed, “Hebrews 11 interprets the redemptive history of the O.T. in an ‘exemplary sense.’”<sup>4</sup> Finally, “exemplary” preachers pointed to the usage of Elijah’s experience in 1 Kings 17–18 by James (5:17–18) as support for their approach. In 1941, N. Streefkerk wrote, “I am told that when I speak about prayer, I may think of Elijah. But am I not allowed to refer to the power of his prayer when I narrate or preach the *history* of Elijah? That seems extremely odd to me.”<sup>5</sup>

The “redemptive-historical approach” argued that the Old Testament historical texts have a specific purpose: the revelation of God’s coming to

1. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 50.

2. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 58.

3. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 113–19.

4. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 117. Here, Greidanus quotes Ph. J. Hyser.

5. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 118.

the world in Christ.<sup>6</sup> Thus, preachers who want to preach on issues like covetousness or prayer should “take a text which presents God’s direct revelation on these matters” rather than trying to illustrate them from a narrative text.<sup>7</sup> Redemptive-historical preachers opposed the exemplary approach as a “fragmentary interpretation which reads the Bible as a collection of biographies.” One preacher, T. Hoekstra, warned: “When glittering subsidiary characters appear in redemptive history, the danger is undoubtedly present that the leading character will recede to the background, that Christ will remain in the darkness.”<sup>8</sup> According to the redemptive-historical proponents, this did not mean drawing a magical line or making an acrobatic leap from Christ to the cross or incarnation. Rather, it meant pointing to the person of Christ or signifying his work as Messiah or Mediator. He is the eternal Logos who is actively at work in Moses, Joshua, the judges, and David.<sup>9</sup>

Preachers on the redemptive-historical side of the debate challenged the conclusions of the exemplary approach regarding the New Testament’s usage of examples from Old Testament events and characters. They argued that the words translated as “examples” in 1 Corinthians 10—*typoi* (τυποί, v. 6) and *typikōs* (τυπικῶς, v. 11)—refer to types or prefigurations of events in the messianic age rather than to pedagogical examples.<sup>10</sup> Also, given that Hebrews 11:35–38 includes extrabiblical persons as well as biblical ones, we should take the exemplars of faith as “concrete illustrations” rather than as “pieces of normative interpretation.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the fact that James 5:17–18 uses Elijah as an illustration does not imply that prayer is the specific intent of 1 Kings 17–18. There are many other elements in that narrative, and we must not let them sidetrack us from preaching the intent of the text—the revelation of God’s coming to the world in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Greidanus’s Critique and a Later Twist***

After pondering the arguments of both sides, Greidanus offered a brilliant critique. Essentially, he argued for a mediating position. He agreed

6. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 132–33.

7. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 132.

8. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 141.

9. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 144–45.

10. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 114.

11. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 117.

12. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 119.

with the redemptive-historical side that the historical narratives in the Old Testament “do not intend to give biographies of men but to proclaim the redemptive acts of God for man.”<sup>13</sup> These narratives bear witness to Christ, the one who has been active from the beginning as the Logos.<sup>14</sup> Greidanus also agreed with the exemplary side that these narratives have normative as well as historical authority. He concluded, “One does not have to turn to another category of texts or fall back on examples to find warning, comfort, and admonition. All of this is already contained in the historical text”—that is, in an Old Testament narrative text.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the proclamation of these texts must be *relevant*, communicating the “ethical thrust” of a passage within the light of the author’s theocentric framework.<sup>16</sup> After all, the historical accounts in the Old Testament proclaim God’s acts to God’s people in their particular needs.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Greidanus faulted the redemptive-historical approach for confining Old Testament historical texts in a framework that prevented them from saying what they intend to say. He criticized the exemplary approach for reading them in a biographical, moralistic way.<sup>18</sup>

Eighteen years after his dissertation, Greidanus worked his conclusions into a volume for pastors and aspiring preachers titled *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. This volume took into account the blossoming field of literary studies and dealt with four types of biblical literature, including Hebrew narratives. Then Greidanus changed his mind. In an interesting twist, Greidanus argued for a much stricter Christ-centered approach in his 1999 volume, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. He now counsels preachers to move from the Old Testament text to the incarnate Christ.<sup>19</sup>

## The Way Forward

I am convinced that the original mediating view of Greidanus is the way forward for faithful preaching of Old Testament narrative texts. What I

13. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 215.

14. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 223.

15. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 212.

16. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 226.

17. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 212.

18. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 173.

19. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 36–37, 233.

am suggesting, then, is a mediating view that takes the strengths of both major views about preaching the Old Testament. These views, described below, are the *theocentric* view and the *Christocentric* view. Notice that the alternatives are not the same as they were in the Reformed churches in Holland just prior to World War II. Exemplary preaching from Old Testament narrative literature is still popular. However, the leading practitioners and professors of preaching are not treating it as a viable approach—at least not as an exclusive approach. Those who make room for it do so as a subcategory under either theocentric or Christocentric preaching. I will have more to say about this in a moment.

No one who takes the Scriptures seriously denies that the Old Testament speaks of Jesus Christ. Jesus claimed this in conversations with his followers the day he was raised from death (see Luke 24:25–27, 44–47). The issue, though, is *how* to preach the Old Testament, including its narratives, in light of the way that the Old Testament points to Jesus.

### ***The Theocentric View***

Preachers who adopt a theocentric approach stand in the tradition of John Calvin who emphasized preaching a particular text with a view to exposing the intention of the author.<sup>20</sup> For Calvin, unlike Luther, theocentric preaching was implicitly Christ-centered,<sup>21</sup> and Calvin was critical of Luther’s Christological exegesis.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the best current representatives of the theocentric view are Kenneth Langley and Abraham Kuruvilla.

Langley argues that “Old Testament narratives related how God has acted in, through, and despite the actions of the human characters. The agenda is theological. To concentrate on human deeds, then, is often to miss the point.” However, “recognizing that God is central in these stories does not mean they have no exemplar value for moral instruction.”<sup>23</sup> Langley sees this as the problem with the Christocentric view. In its quest not to treat the Bible as a to-do list or self-improvement manual, “this approach so privileges the indicative that the imperative of Scripture is sometimes oppressed.”<sup>24</sup> Yet God’s “grace does not preclude exhortation, as indicated

20. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 127–51.

21. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 147. See pp. 111–26 for Luther’s approach.

22. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 139.

23. Langley, “Theocentric View,” 83.

24. Langley, “Theocentric View,” 101. The “indicative” refers to what God has done, while the “imperative” refers to what God calls people to do.

by hundreds of scriptural commands, by our Lord’s proclamation, ‘Repent and believe the good news’ (Mark 1:15), and the indicative-imperative structure of some of Paul’s epistles.”<sup>25</sup> In Langley’s view, then, a sermon works from the textual details to discern the theological message and issues a call for God’s people to respond appropriately.

Kuruville takes a similar view. He wants preachers to expound the particulars of the specific text they preach so they can reveal its theology (what it affirms about God) and the life change for which it calls.<sup>26</sup> Kuruville shrewdly labels his approach “Christiconic” since it “sees each pericope of Scripture portraying a facet of the canonical image of Christ.”<sup>27</sup> To put it another way, he argues that preaching is trinitarian. “The text inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21) depicts Jesus Christ, the Son, to whose image humans are to conform (Rom. 8:29). As they are so conformed, the will of God the Father is being done and his kingdom is coming to pass (Matt. 6:10).”<sup>28</sup> Kuruville’s concern with the Christocentric approach is that it risks neglecting the “specific thrusts of individual OT texts.”<sup>29</sup> While he sees a place for biblical theology (the tracing of biblical themes) in the teaching program of the church, he believes that “the sermon is not a place for such a display.” Instead, “preaching is the event where the specific message of a particular text—its divine demand—is explicated and brought to bear upon the life of the children of God to transform them for the glory of God.”<sup>30</sup>

### ***The Christocentric View***

In the Christocentric, or redemptive-historical, approach to preaching, the focus is on Jesus Christ, the one to whom all portions of Scripture point. However, there is a rather broad spectrum of “Christ-centered” approaches to preaching.

Sidney Greidanus, as we have already noted, represents a more restrictive Christocentric approach. He places his approach “somewhere between Calvin’s theocentric method and Luther’s Christological method.”<sup>31</sup>

25. Langley, “Theocentric View,” 101–2.

26. Kuruville, “Christiconic View,” 57–58.

27. Kuruville, *Privilege the Text!*, 29.

28. Kuruville, “Christiconic View,” 63.

29. Kuruville, *Privilege the Text!*, 239.

30. Kuruville, *Privilege the Text!*, 240.

31. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 227.



Greidanus builds his approach on the context in which the Old Testament finds its final interpretation. “For Christians, that context cannot be anything but the New Testament.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the issue that confronts preachers is “how to preach the incarnate Christ from a book that predates his incarnation by many centuries.”<sup>33</sup> This means moving from the Old Testament text one is preaching to the New Testament to preach Christ. This move cannot be arbitrary, though. “One must look for a clue, a feature, in the Old Testament text that warrants linking it with a particular New Testament event or one or more New Testament passages.”<sup>34</sup> Greidanus identifies seven ways a preacher can make this move: redemptive-historical progression, promise fulfillment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, contrast, and New Testament references.<sup>35</sup>

Greidanus insists that the move to Christ from an Old Testament text must align with the author’s intended message, and the way to discover this message is through rigorous literary, grammatical, and historical analysis.<sup>36</sup> It is wrong to force a text to say what it does not say.<sup>37</sup> Thus, he identifies shortcomings in the approach of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who is, perhaps, the prince of Christ-centered preachers. Greidanus faulted Spurgeon for using Old Testament texts as “springboards” for preaching Christ and for traveling “through the swamp of typologizing and allegorizing” to get to Christ rather than through a careful interpretive process.<sup>38</sup>

The narrowness of Greidanus’s approach surfaces in the application of Old Testament texts to new covenant believers. For example, he cautions preachers not to present David in 1 Samuel 17 as a model of courage. Instead, the essence of the David-Goliath narrative is that “the Lord himself defeats the enemy of his people. This theme locates the passage on the highway of God’s kingdom history which leads straight to Jesus’ victory over Satan.”<sup>39</sup> The application for today is for God’s people to get involved in the battle against the evil one (if prosperity has blinded them to it) and to rely on God who fights for them (if they have been relying

32. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 40.

33. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 54.

34. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 54.

35. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 233. See 203–25 for a discussion of the first six ways. Greidanus notes that these ways “are not scientifically precise and overlap considerably” (203).

36. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 284–85.

37. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 37.

38. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 160–61.

39. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 239.

on their own strength). Similarly, Greidanus takes issue with preachers who apply the unique testing of Abraham in Genesis 22 to the testing of God's people in general. The textual theme, or main idea, proposed by some of the better commentators is something like this: "Whenever the sovereign God tests the faith of his people, he demands unquestioning, trusting obedience."<sup>40</sup> However, Greidanus offers this alternative: "The Lord provides a lamb for a burnt offering so that Isaac (Israel) may live."<sup>41</sup> This results in the following sermon theme: "The Lord provides a sacrificial lamb so that his people may live."<sup>42</sup> The goal of the sermon is to "encourage God's people fully to trust their faithful Lord for their salvation."<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, Bryan Chapell represents a less restrictive Christocentric approach. He is not leery of preaching the instructions of Scripture—its imperatives as well as its indicatives. Rather, his concern is that preaching "matters of faith or practice without rooting their foundation or fruit in what God would do, has done, or will do through the ministry of Christ creates a human-centered (anthropocentric) faith without Christian distinctions."<sup>44</sup> The key is to relate a particular preaching text to the big story of Scripture—its redemptive message that moves through the stages of creation, fall, redemption, and final consummation.<sup>45</sup> This is the task of biblical theology. In recent decades, evangelical preachers have infused biblical theology into their preaching, understanding that the redemptive flow of biblical history is an essential part of a text's context.<sup>46</sup>

Chapell counsels preachers to read with "gospel glasses." These are "not X-ray goggles that make an image or reference to Jesus mysteriously emerge from behind some bush in every biblical account."<sup>47</sup> Rather, they reflect aspects of God's nature that provide redemption as well as aspects of human nature that require redemption.

40. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 303.

41. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 304.

42. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 315.

43. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 315.

44. Chapell, "Redemptive-Historic View," 15.

45. Chapell, "Redemptive-Historic View," 4–7.

46. Chapell, "Redemptive-Historic View," 3. Chapell's list of preachers who used biblical theology in their sermons includes Don Carson, Sinclair Ferguson, John Piper, Steve Brown, James Montgomery Boice, Tony Merida, Jerry Bridges, Ray Ortlund, Danny Akin, and Timothy Keller.

47. Chapell, "Redemptive-Historic View," 17.

Timothy Keller's approach seems to fall between Greidanus and Chappell. I have listened to dozens of Keller's sermons and have appreciated his willingness to preach the Scriptures' appeals to holy living. Yet, in addition to grounding what Scripture tells us to do (imperative) in what God through Christ has done for us (indicative), Keller is eager to point out how Jesus is the fulfillment of the major themes, figures, and images in the Bible.<sup>48</sup> Jesus is the better David, the better Esther, the true king, and the just judge. The key to preaching Christ "is to find out how your particular text fits into the full canonical context and participates as a chapter in the great narrative arc of the Bible, which is how God saves us and renews the world through the salvation by free grace in his Son, Jesus Christ."<sup>49</sup>

### ***The Theocentric-Christocentric View***

As noted above, I am advocating for the mediating view Sidney Greidanus argued for in his 1970 doctoral dissertation. Yes, I recognize the danger in taking a mediating view. I lived in Montana for almost half of my life, and I spent the better part of a year working on a cattle ranch. So I have an affinity for the sayings of the Old West. They are often blunt and do not mince words. One of them is, "He who straddles a fence gets a sore crotch." This speaks to the danger of a mediating view. The idea is, make up your mind. You can't have it both ways. However, I believe preachers *need* to have it both ways when it comes to the debate over Christ-centered preaching. I believe we must read the Old Testament in its literary, grammatical, and historical-cultural environment so as to determine its theological message and its "ethical thrust." At the same time, I believe we must locate the theology of this text in the larger storyline of the Bible—the concern of biblical theology.

Although labels are fraught with difficulty, some call this the "Christotelic" view, acknowledging that Christ is the *telos*, or goal, of the Old Testament. John Walton says it well: "In the christotelic approach, we recognize that all of God's revelation reaches a new plateau in Christ, so all of it can be seen as heading in that direction. . . . Christology, then, cannot be left out of the equation, but it does not replace what the Old Testament authors were doing."<sup>50</sup> Christopher Wright makes a similar point when

48. Keller, *Preaching*, 73–82.

49. Keller, *Preaching*, 70.

50. J. Walton, *Old Testament Theology*, 5–6.

he says, “Preaching from the Old Testament is not just preaching *about* Jesus, though it should certainly lead people ultimately to Jesus. . . . It all *points* to Christ. It is not all ‘*about* Christ.’”<sup>51</sup>

I will present a process for connecting to the Bible’s storyline and its hero, Jesus Christ, in chapter 9. For now, here is my plea to those who identify exclusively as theocentric or Christocentric.

To those preachers who identify as “theocentric,” I remind you that the divine demand of an Old Testament narrative text must always be grounded in what God has done for you in Christ. The historical accounts concerning Deborah, Abraham, Ruth, or David cannot be understood and applied apart from their connection to the metanarrative of the Bible and the hero of that narrative, Jesus the Messiah. This is where I differ from Kuruvilla. He sees the sermon not as a place for a display of biblical theology but as “the event where the specific message of a particular text—its divine demand—is explicated and brought to bear on the life of the children of God to transform them for the glory of God.”<sup>52</sup> Yet how can an Old Testament text be brought to bear on the lives of new covenant believers without noting how its theological message is shaped by the way it finds its fulfillment in Christ? I appreciate Kuruvilla’s concern about how a Christ-centered focus can obscure “the specific thrust of individual OT texts.”<sup>53</sup> However, if this specific thrust gets “swallowed up” by “biblical-theology transactions,”<sup>54</sup> the fault lies with the preacher—not the methodology itself.

To those preachers who fall on the side of a more Christocentric approach, I remind you of Timothy Keller’s warning. He says that “it is possible to ‘get to Christ’ so quickly in preaching a text that we fail to be sensitive to the particularities of the text’s message. We leapfrog over historical realities to Jesus as though the Old Testament Scriptures had little significance to their original readers.”<sup>55</sup> This amounts to flattening the text so that every sermon sounds the same and overlooks critical topics—whether the dignity of work, the value of human life, or the way God’s people handle suffering.<sup>56</sup> Another danger is to “find” Christ in details

51. C. Wright, *How to Preach and Teach*, 52–53 (emphasis original).

52. Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!*, 240.

53. Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!*, 239.

54. This is Kuruvilla’s concern and language in *Privilege the Text!*, 240.

55. Keller, *Preaching*, 60.

56. Langley, “Theocentric View,” 103–4; C. Wright, *How to Preach and Teach*, 56–59.

where he is not. Kevin Vanhoozer offers this perspective on how Jesus explained to the disciples on the road to Emmaus “what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27): “I believe this was not a heavy-handed allegorical reading that made use of fanciful connections between incidental details and the life of Christ, but rather an interpretation that discerned the through-line, the central dramatic thrust, of divine redemptive history—namely the way in which the prophets, priests, and kings anticipated aspects of Christ’s own work, and the way in which God’s repeated delivery of the people of Israel from their enemies (and ultimately from themselves) anticipated the delivery of the church from sin, death, and destruction.”<sup>57</sup> Lucas O’Neill refers to these twin dangers as *missing* the text (that is, “failing to honor the details of the passage we are preaching”) and *misusing* the text (that is, mishandling “the details of the text in order to get to Christ”).<sup>58</sup>

Christocentric preachers will also do well to remember that Christ-centered preaching does not preclude calling the people of God to behave, as well as believe, in a certain way. I disagree with the kind of strict Christ-centered approach that says: “We do not confront men with Christ by preaching theological ideas nor by ethical exhortations, but by rehearsing the saving events witnessed in Scripture.”<sup>59</sup> Such an approach is unnecessarily reductionistic. “When the apostles spoke of the gospel and rehearsed its saving events, they issued a call for nonbelievers to believe (see Acts 2:38–41 and 1 Cor. 15:1–3) and a call for believers to align their behavior with the gospel (see Gal. 2:14).”<sup>60</sup> As Gordon Wenham says, “Old Testament narrative books do have a didactic purpose, that is, they are trying to instill both theological truths and ethical ideals into their readers.”<sup>61</sup>

My conviction, then, is that preachers need not pit a theocentric approach against a Christocentric approach.<sup>62</sup> Rather the former should lead to the latter, and the latter should build upon the former. As D. A. Carson observed in an interview with R. C. Sproul, the New Testament

57. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 224–25.

58. O’Neill, *Preaching to Be Heard*, 127.

59. Donald G. Miller as quoted by Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 235–36.

60. Mathewson, “Prophetic Preaching from Old Testament Narrative Texts,” 41.

61. Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 3.

62. For a helpful, in-depth comparison and evaluation of the leading Christocentric proponent (Sidney Greidanus) and the leading theocentric proponent (Abraham Kuruvilla), see Price, “Comparing Sidney Greidanus,” 69–93.

writers worked with biblical-theological categories and drew moral lessons as they read the Old Testament.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Michael Kruger says, “OT stories/figures can function both as a type of Christ and as moral examples of what true faith can produce in the life of God’s people.”<sup>64</sup> In the next chapter, I will encourage preachers to focus on the theology of the narrative—its prophetic message or “ethical thrust.” Sometimes, the characters provide negative or positive models of this message; at other times, their behavior is not the main issue. Furthermore, in chapter 9, I will discuss how to utilize biblical theology in a sermon on an Old Testament narrative while still highlighting the particulars of the text and its theological message. For now, though, my plea is simply not to drive a wedge between biblical theology and the ethical ideals of a particular narrative. Theocentric and Christocentric preaching need not be mutually exclusive.

63. See Ligonier Ministries, “RC Sproul Interviews DA Carson.” The pertinent section runs from about 21:22 to 23:08. Carson’s answer is in response to a question on canonical interpretation. Here is a lightly edited transcript of Carson’s answer:

Many Christian preachers have preached series from the life of Abraham or the life of David, and it has been not uncommon [for them] to preach almost moralizing sermons. David was good here, let’s be good. David was bad there, let’s not be bad. And that’s about all you see from it whether from Abraham or Daniel or David. Everything becomes a moralizing lesson and that’s all. Then they become aware of biblical-theological categories and see how David is the beginning of the Davidic dynasty and how . . . through the promises given to Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed. So they begin to preach in these broader categories and forget the moral categories. But then you . . . remember how Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1–13 can read Israel’s history and draw moralizing lessons. In other words, one of the ways that the Old Testament is read on occasion is precisely to draw moralizing lessons. Elijah was a man as we are, yet he persevered. We should be prayer warriors as he was. There’s no deep typology. It is an argument by analogy. He’s somebody to imitate. It’s application.

64. Kruger, “Are We Allowed to Use OT Figures as Moral Examples?”