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Carl Graesser Jr.

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Preaching from the Old Testament

CARL GRAESSER, JR.

Preaching from the Old Testament has fallen on evil times. Many a pastor, even if he does not have a mental block from struggles with Hebrew at the seminary or a feeling of guilt because of rusty exegetical skills, feels much more at home in the New Testament. If he should attempt to preach on an Old Testament text, he cannot assume that his audience has either a ready knowledge or interest in the Old Testament. Unlike a bygone generation, his audience would think it a joke to name a child Jehoshaphat or Ahab or Hepzibah.

Why then should a pastor feel any compulsion to preach from the Old Testament? What are the difficulties involved in preaching an Old Testament text? How does one go about finding God's Word for modern man from such a strange and ancient book? These are the questions this article will discuss. The writer lays no claim to being a professional teacher of homiletics. At the same time, as an Old Testament exegete he is much interested and involved in preaching from the Old Testament. He is convinced that exegesis which does not have homiletics and proclamation of God's Word as its ultimate goal is illegitimate exegesis and unprofitable effort.

Carl Graesser, Jr., is an assistant professor of Old Testament Exegesis at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He previously served as an instructor in Hebrew at Concordia Seminary from 1953 to 1957 and as an assistant professor at Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne, Ind. He has held his present teaching position since 1964.

I

Why should a New Testament minister preach from the Old Testament? First of all because God speaks His healing Word through the Old Testament. Preaching is, after all, witnessing to that Word which one has heard God speak to his own heart. When preaching is witness to this Word of God, it becomes itself God's speaking to man. To preach one must therefore first look to that place where one hears God speak and then witness to and proclaim what He has said. The preacher who takes his ordination vow on the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments will not want to neglect either of these Testaments. The New Testament witness, of course, is the Christian norm within the entire Scriptures and so is more important than the Old Testament in many respects. Still the Scriptures include both Testaments, and it may be noted that the Old Testament amounts to no less than 77 percent of the Bible.

Second, the New Testament minister preaches from the Old Testament because that is the New Testament way of preaching. Our Lord Himself did this. He proclaimed "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." To understand just what kingdom of God this is that He announced, one must look to the Old Testament. But our Lord used more than the vocabulary and images of the Old Testament in His preaching. He constantly appealed to the Old Testament as that place where one could expect to hear God speaking. Therefore the first Christians used the Old Tes-

tament as their Bible, not only to understand the terms of the apostolic preaching but also to hear the gracious promise of God which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It remains a sound generalization that "the Old Testament tells us *what* Christ is, the New Testament tells us *who* He is."

Third, the New Testament minister will preach from the Old Testament because certain things are said more powerfully and more fully in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. Two examples are especially relevant and striking in our age. First of all there is the proclamation of God as Creator and Lord of this world, an emphasis on the doctrine of the First Article. The New Testament writers did not stress the lordship of the Creator over this world as much as the Old Testament did because they stood at the edge of the parousia. There simply wasn't time to take this world very seriously and spell out all the implications of the doctrine of God's creation. In a space and atomic age, when people take this created world seriously and more and more are finding little or no place for God in it, this Old Testament emphasis on the lordship of the Creator over all His creation and history needs to be underlined.

In addition, the Old Testament speaks eloquently of government and social justice. The New Testament writers did not stress the Christian's responsibility in government to a great extent because they were speaking to a society where the average individual could not bear a great responsibility in government. Furthermore many of the early Christians did not even have the status of citizens. In a society where the individual does bear responsibility for government and where there is

great concern for social justice, God's will and lordship also in this area must be proclaimed. To this the prophets Amos, Micah, and Isaiah speak mightily.

In certain respects, therefore, the Old Testament stands on its own feet. Even after the church possessed the New Testament writings it retained the Old Testament as part of its Scriptures. It recognized that without the Old Testament the New Testament was incomplete. Not only does the New Testament bring to fulfillment what the Old Testament points to, but the Old Testament also addresses itself to certain problems to which the New Testament does not speak in detail.

Fourth, the New Testament minister will preach from the Old Testament because it often possesses a special appeal, a persuasive power and concreteness aptly suited to our age. It grips people. Frequently it speaks of human experiences with which modern man easily identifies and which he recognizes as relevant. This writer has never forgotten the impression created on a congregation when his pastor began a sermon: "This past week I read the story of a man whose wife was unfaithful to him and became a prostitute. Yet he loved her so that he went after her, sought her out, and brought her home." This congregation was caught up by this piece of life. Many wondered which recent novel the pastor had been reading. Of course, it was actually the book of the prophet Hosea, but the pastor's purpose had been accomplished. The interest and involvement of the congregation had been gained. A world fearful of the bomb, of global war, of nation rising against nation, surely is attuned to the Old Testament prophecies of imminent destruction in the pre-exilic prophets.

Finally, many a New Testament minister will find it helpful to preach from the Old Testament also for a change of pace, for variety and a breath of fresh air. In the monotony that may build up in the rounds of preaching once or more every week without a break from the New Testament both the pastor and congregation may appreciate the freshness that an occasional change to an Old Testament text may bring.

II

What are the difficulties encountered in preaching from the Old Testament? One of the problems that has hindered the homiletical use of the Old Testament in the past has been a too limited view of the Old Testament. There was a tendency to find the Old Testament speaking to our present age only when it predicted Jesus, the Christ. Today it is recognized that the Old Testament speaks to us also through those words addressed to the everyday needs of ancient Israel.

One of the practical problems involved in preaching on the Old Testament is the fact that so little is known about the Old Testament. It has a strange geography, history, and culture. It takes time to explain this, perhaps as much as 20 to 30 percent of the total time of the sermon if one wishes to lead the audience to a meaningful understanding. One can, however, try to make a virtue of this necessity. When these precious minutes are used to explain the situation and feelings of the people to whom God spoke in the text, the congregation is often so caught up in that problem that they identify closely with these Israelites. Then they hear that Word once spoken in ancient times all the better. Seeing their own needs in the needs of those

ancient people, they hear that ancient word as a word of God which has present meaning for them also in these last days.

In this connection it is worth asking whether it would not be wise to put the Bible back into the pew. Those Christian communities which have the habit of taking their Bibles to their pews and paging through them during the sermon have a rich resource for more powerful preaching. Properly used, Bibles in every pew, provided with several clear maps and a small schematic chart of Biblical chronology, can be of great aid in preaching. Not only would this TV generation be able to see the history and geography before their eyes in the charts and maps, but they could also follow the pastor as he makes observations on the text before their eyes. This would mean, if nothing else, that the majority of the congregation would actually hold a Bible in their hands and open it and read it once in that week. In the process, too, the pastor will be able to offer guidance in how to read the Bible and how to hear the Word of God in the words of the Bible. It seems clear, at very least, that experimentation with such use of the Scriptures in the pews could open new approaches for preaching and make the service more meaningful for the worshiper.

A third difficulty facing the pastor when he preaches on the Old Testament is the fact that very often the Old Testament is simply a difficult book to understand. Modern man just does not share some of the patterns of thought and the experiences which were common in the culture of the Old Testament world. "A restive young camel interlacing her tracks, a wild ass used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind" (Jer. 2:23-24). Such imagery,

once apparently obvious and to the point, hardly is in the experience of a people who have seen a camel only, if ever, behind bars in a zoo. The rather different psychology of man in the Old Testament is another case in point. The intellect is seated in the heart rather than the head. The emotions are seated in the bowels, not the heart. The word often translated as "soul" is sometimes used to indicate a corpse! (see Num. 19:13; Lev. 21:11; etc.). If it is difficult at times for a pastor to understand such language, it is even more difficult for the layman who does not have the benefit of a knowledge of the original language or of professional study in the seminary. Most people feel much more at home within the New Testament world which seems (though often is not actually) much closer to our Western way of thinking. Fortunately there are available today many aids to understand this strange Old Testament world.¹

¹ Among the increasing number of helpful books dealing with ancient Biblical culture the following stand out. Roland deVaux's *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), is nothing less than a superb as well as sane summary of Old Testament cultural and social institutions as revealed by archaeology and the Biblical text. G. Ernest Wright's *Biblical Archaeology*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), collects the archaeological evidence dealing with Israel's history and religion. John Bright's *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) deals sympathetically with Israel's history and religion. Martin Noth's *Old Testament World*, trans. Victor Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), introduces the Ancient Near East as it is known today. D. Winston Thomas' *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper, 1961), Harper Torchbook, gathers the most important documents discovered bearing on the Old Testament. James Pritchard's *Ancient Near East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) is a col-

The difficulties noted thus far have stemmed basically from the fact that the Old Testament was written in ancient times and addressed to a culture much different from ours. There are also certain theological difficulties which present themselves when we seek God's message to modern man in the Old Testament. Perhaps the greatest difficulty in applying the Old Testament message to our day derives from the fact that the Old Testament covenant deals with a political entity, Israel. The New Testament does not deal with a political entity, but rather with the Christian church, which cuts across political and temporal lines. "My kingdom is not of this world." God made a covenant with a political group, Israel, and also with their rulers, the dynasty of David. Isaiah could therefore go to this people and tell them that when they made an alliance with Egypt they were denying the promise of Yahweh's aid. Isaiah could denounce a military treaty with Egypt as expressing a lack of faith in Yahweh (Is. 28—31). One could hardly go to the American Senate and denounce membership in NATO as a direct rejection of God. God never made a covenant with the United States of America! How then can one apply Isaiah's words about alliances with foreign nations to our modern world? Should they be allegorized? Should they be spiritualized? They certainly cannot be taken in their direct, simple, original sense. It is, however, important to find the modern meaning of these words because some of the most memorable statements on faith

lection of both texts and pictures of archaeological discoveries shedding light on the Old Testament. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 Volumes (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), is an invaluable and usually up-to-date collection of data.

in the entire Old Testament were made in connection with the denunciation of these foreign alliances. (See Is. 28—31, especially 28:16; 30:15; and 7:11-15.)

The Old Testament much more than the New speaks in terms of this material world. God's blessings and His judgments are depicted primarily in physical terms. The covenant blessings (Deut. 28 and Lev. 26) include long life, large families, huge flocks and herds, and the good land in which to dwell. The curses for breaking covenant are short life, defeat in battle, exile in foreign land, famine, sterility, sickness, and death. The explicit emphasis of the threat "in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:17) is seen to a large extent as physical death in the Old Testament. On the other hand, spiritual death receives a much greater emphasis in the New Testament than in the Old. In any case, in the Old Testament the blessing of God is generally pictured as occurring in this world more than in the next world. There are very few passages in the Old Testament which hold out the explicit hope of a resurrection after death or a state of bliss in heaven. (See for example Is. 26:19 and Dan. 12:2.) In many respects this state of affairs places God's relationship with man in a different light. The necessity to find God's justice and fairness in *this* world raises basic questions which the New Testament can avoid by appealing to a judgment in the next life where God will show Himself to be just and fair. It is difficult for a person who believes in a judgment after death to appreciate fully the problem which Job faced in trying to find God fully just and fair in this life alone.

Finally, and most important, there are certain problems presented by the fact that

the Old Testament is incomplete in itself and therefore cannot be preached without reference to the New Testament revelation in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament looks forward to the goal of the coming of the kingdom of God. Because that kingdom has come in Jesus Christ, the Old Testament can be preached only in the light of that fulfillment and completeness of the New Testament event of Jesus Christ.

The difficulty stems from the fact that while the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament, it also brings something radically new. In other words, the New Testament not only stands in continuity with the Old Testament, but in certain respects it stands also in discontinuity with the Old Testament. The radical newness of the New Covenant is signaled in many ways. There is in part a new theological vocabulary. No longer is God basically Master or Lord, but He is Father. No longer is it possible to think of man's proper response to God as one of awe and reverence and fear, but faith is now the key term. No longer is man usually called a servant of God, but he has become a son of his Heavenly Father and co-heir with Jesus Christ. This shift is basically terminological and relatively subtle. There are more radical changes in regard to ritual and sacrifice. There is a new approach to covenant law, and the New Testament erasure of all differences between priests and laity, between Jew and Gentile, between male and female. Yet for all this discontinuity, the New Testament itself is self-consciously in continuity with the Old Testament. The writers of the New Testament understand themselves and their Gospel in terms of the Old Testament, their sacred Scriptures. But when they proclaim a covenant, it is

a new covenant, for a new Israel, in a new age.

III

How then can the preacher derive that word which God would speak to His people today through the Old Testament? The writer offers an "analogical method" not as a professional homiletician but rather as a description of the way in which he has found himself going about the business of finding the message in a text on which he preaches.

A few preliminary comments are in order. Twentieth-century man quite properly asks how the Old Testament, a piece of literature describing an ancient situation in a far-off land in an exceedingly strange culture, is ever going to be relevant to a 20th-century American congregation. The possibility of relevance lies in the common humanity shared by ancient and modern man. We stand today in a situation analogous to the situation in which people of ancient times stood. Just as they stood before God and man in a broken relationship, so do we. Like them, we too stand in a relationship where love and trust do not rule. As they did, so we also live in this physical world and share this-worldly hopes for prosperity, health, and length of life. Together with them we cherish the desire that that which is broken may be healed. Thus we hope that we will find meaning and self-fulfillment and live in the praise of our Creator. Thus it is in theory possible that an ancient text like the Old Testament may speak meaningfully to modern man.

This possibility becomes a reality only because it is the same Lord of creation and history who both spoke to ancient man through this text and who now speaks to

us as our Lord today. Unless we stand today in the same situation as Old Testament man and share with him the same Lord, the Old Testament (or the New Testament for that matter) can hardly be meaningful to us today.

There are three basic steps which must be taken to determine the message of the text. There is, first of all, the exegetical task. The preacher must search, as rigorously as he is able with the tools and abilities that God gives him, for the answer to the question, "What did this text mean, then and there, to the Old Testament people to whom it was first addressed?" In other words, "What was God saying to them?" This question is necessitated both by the nature of historical exegesis and by the desire to avoid what is perhaps the most dangerous and likely pitfall which faces the preacher. Unless he first asks rigorously, "What *did* it mean?" and consciously blocks out all thought of the 20th century and of his existential needs to find a message to preach from this text, he is most likely to read 20th-century concerns and ideas into the text. Such eisegesis is of no help, of course. It may be a mere reflection of personal thoughts without any attempt to discover the thoughts of God expressed in the text. The history of exegesis is filled with examples of those who unfortunately found themselves and their own concerns in the text rather than the one thing needful, the very Word of God. And so the preacher as exegete will try to "put on the sandals" of those to whom God first spoke through this text and try to hear that word as freshly as they did.

The second step is the pastoral task of determining the needs of the people to whom the sermon is to be delivered. The

experienced preacher knows that if he does not address himself to the specific needs of his people he may be wasting their time as well as his own. Therefore he gives thought to their immediate needs and endeavors to search out specifically those needs which are analogous to the needs of the ancient people to whom this text first spoke.

The third step is the key process of application. Here the preacher applies that ancient word which God spoke to the needs of his own people today. But since God has spoken in these last days through His Son and decisively brought in the new age in Jesus Christ, the Christian preacher knows that he cannot apply any Old Testament message to his New Testament-age congregation apart from the New Testament context in which all Old Testament texts now come to us. He understands that he must focus the Old Testament message through the fullness of the New Testament revelation in Jesus Christ on the hearers before him today.

Here the figure of a lens may be helpful. The light of the Old Testament must shine through the lens of Jesus Christ and the New Testament revelation in order that it may be focused precisely on the modern hearer. The figure of the lens describes this process in several ways. First of all, a lens allows light to go through it. The light of the Old Testament falls upon us through Jesus Christ. Second, a lens can cut out and cut off certain rays of light. When the Old Testament light passes through the lens of Jesus Christ, part of the message of the Old Testament is cut out or limited, since the New Testament has abrogated certain aspects of the Old Testament revelation. Third, a lens can refract the light

that passes through it by redirecting it or by breaking it up in such a way as to reveal its component parts in a way that seems to expand or even to transform the light. One remembers how simple white light is transformed into the colors of a rainbow. The simple message of the Old Testament may be opened to all its fullness by Jesus Christ. Fourth, the light which passes through a lens may cause the lens itself to glow and sparkle.

Every analogy limps, but the points made in the preceding paragraph may be illustrated by the following examples. First of all, the Christian preacher will never wish to apply the Old Testament without relating it to the New Testament revelation in Jesus Christ. Second, when he applies the Old Testament, he must remember that certain things in the Old Testament have been superseded. For example, there is no longer any command to sacrifice animals. The lens of Jesus Christ has blocked out this Old Testament demand. Third, the New Testament revelation reshapes or deepens the Old Testament message. The Old Testament sacrifices become a symbol of man's unworthiness before God, of man's need to give homage to God, to offer God his very best. They also symbolize the fact that unless God reaches down graciously to man and atones, the gap between man and God cannot be bridged at all.

Of course, at times the New Testament so reshapes or refracts the Old Testament message that it seems rather to transform it or, perhaps more accurately stated, to add something new to it. The most striking example, no doubt, is the person of the Messiah. In the Old Testament the coming king was depicted as one who was in a

unique sense close to God and His representative. In the fullness of time He came as the very Son of God. God's fulfillment usually turns out to be even greater than His prophecy!

Fourth, the New Testament lens glows in the light of the Old Testament message. In the 20th century modern man finds it difficult to appreciate fully all that the figure of sacrifice means. The meaning of our Lord's sacrifice as the Lamb of God takes on a new luster and glory after one has read a dozen chapters of Leviticus.

We may summarize these four points in prosaic rather than figurative language. (1) The message of the Old Testament speaks to modern man through Jesus Christ. (2) Certain parts of the Old Testament are abrogated by the New Testament. (3) Certain parts of the Old Testament are supplemented by the New Testament. (4) Certain parts of the Old Testament enrich the meaning of the New Testament.

It cannot be overemphasized that in this third critical step no rigid rules can be drawn up save this one: the creative Spirit of God must be allowed to act. The power by which we apply the ancient Word of God to the congregation before us is not ours. It is nothing less than the creative power of God at work in us. And, happily, the Spirit "blows where it wills." The work of the Spirit cannot be molded by rigid rules. Many a preacher can witness to the fact that his greatest inspiration usually comes when he has worked hardest and most methodically, yet his inspiration defies any such simple explanation. He finds the word to proclaim as he hears God speak to him and as he is empowered to witness to this in his own proclamation.

At this point, then, the preacher must go about forming an outline for a sermon which will most efficiently proclaim the message which he has now derived from the text. It may on occasion be helpful to use *two* texts when one preaches from the Old Testament, both the Old Testament text and also a short New Testament text. This can help give focus and point to the message and highlight the way in which the New Testament takes up the Old Testament message and directs it to contemporary man.

IV

This "analogical method" may be illustrated with Is. 6:1-13, the Old Testament Lesson appointed in *The Lutheran Hymnal* for the feast of the Holy Trinity. First, the message of God to that ancient people must be determined. While worshiping in the temple, perhaps at a point in the liturgy when the sovereign kingship of Yahweh is being celebrated, Isaiah is granted a vision of the heavenly King, resplendent on His throne, with His heavenly court of created spirits about Him chanting antiphonally, "Holy, holy, holy!"² Clearly Yahweh rather than the gods of the threatening Assyrians

² In the light of the New Testament, Christians can hardly sing this song of the Seraphs, the *Sanctus*, without expressing their faith in the Triune God. In view of the lack of unambiguous Trinitarian thinking elsewhere in the Old Testament, however, it seems likely that the repetition here and in the Aaronic blessing was understood by Old Testament men as expressing emphasis (cf. Jer. 7:4 and 22:29). The use of the plural by Yahweh, "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?" (cf. also Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7), most probably reflects the setting of the heavenly court about the king (cf. Job 1; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Jer. 23:18-22). The use of the plural here is only formal, only a part of the figure of the heavenly court. Yahweh alone has decisive authority and power.

is ruling the world. Isaiah is immediately overcome by his unfitnes to face and praise God, but Yahweh graciously cleanses him. Isaiah is then commissioned as Yahweh's messenger to proclaim judgment on faithless Israel.³

Second, we must discover the points at which the modern situation is analogous to the ancient one. The specific needs of each audience will vary in detail, of course, but the following somewhat general similarities suggest themselves. We need to recognize the Ruler and Director of this universe and our relationship to Him all the more acutely in a day when science shows us that the universe is expanding to a size never before even dreamt of by man. We sense that we are out of joint with this world and its Ruler, whether we recognize this in the form of guilt, or of a desire for acceptance, or of a desire to find meaning. Finally, we seek a goal and purpose in our life in the pursuit of which we can act and in which we hope to find achievement and self-fulfillment.

Third, this ancient message must be focused on modern man through the lens of the New Testament revelation. (1) The threefold activity of God shines clearly: His majestic rule over His creation; His redemptive activity toward unclean man; His sending forth of His servants. (2) When projected through the lens of the New Testament, this *triple activity* of God

³ V. 13 is virtually incomprehensible in its present textual state. It may not have alluded originally to that gracious new beginning which Yahweh would make with an undeserving remnant. But even so, this would not cast any doubt on the fact that Isaiah did also proclaim hope oracles (9:2-7; 11:1-9, etc.). It would only indicate that this was not revealed to him in his initial call experience.

becomes also an expression of the *trinitarian nature* of God.⁴ No Christian nurtured on the Apostles' Creed will fail to recognize this. (3) At one point the New Testament will reshape this text. Isaiah was sent with a message primarily of judgment. We, happily, are sent primarily with the message of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. (4) The New Testament lens itself glows more brightly with the light of this text. It is an awesome vision of the majestic thrice-holy God. Who can abide this trembling experience and not grow in his perception of the glory of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our own Creator? This text will also keep the preacher from falling into the Trinity Sunday trap of stressing the nature of our God so much that the real message of the day, that God in all His fullness is constantly active to bless and redeem man, does not receive its proper emphasis.

It was suggested earlier that a short summarizing New Testament text also be used with an Old Testament text. The apostolic blessing in 2 Cor. 13:14 could serve appropriately here. A sermon based on these two texts should enrich the worship of the congregation thereafter as they hear the apostolic blessing at the close of Matins and Vespers or as they chant the "Holy, holy, holy!" of the *Sanctus* in the liturgy of the Holy Communion.

Isaiah 6 is a profound word of God for Trinity Sunday as well as an example of the remarkable unity of the Testaments

⁴ This understanding of the text is suggested by Claus Westermann, *A Thousand Years and a Day*, trans. Stanley Rodman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), pp. 214-18. This book will richly reward both layman and pastor and could well serve as basis for an informed Bible class dealing with the Old Testament.

and of the power of the Old Testament Word. Focused through the lens of the New Testament it proclaims the meaning of the Triune God for us: (1) He is our Maker and the majestic Creator of the universe in which we live. We will discover who we are, how we relate to the world about us, and the true glory of our being only when we affirm Him as our Lord and Ruler. (2) He is our Redeemer. In Jesus Christ, He reached down to rescue

and accept us who were out of joint and without hope. (3) He is our Empowerer, our Sanctifier. He sends us forth to meaningful lives on His mission into the world so that one day the whole world "with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven . . . will laud and magnify" His glorious name proclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy!" Then all the earth will be filled with His glory alone.

St. Louis, Mo.