Preaching the Word

Contemporary Approaches to the Bible for the Pulpit

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For Gwen and Mike—
and our shared love of hermeneutics
over wine and good food

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Introduction

This book invites preachers to consider how recent and various approaches in biblical interpretation, particularly those developed since the historical-critical method in which most clergy have been and are still trained, can have an immediate homiletical payoff. In general, it is challenging for preachers to keep up with developments in biblical scholarship, perhaps having not engaged further formal biblical study since their seminary days. Preaching courses, or classes in biblical studies for that matter, offered at mainline seminaries are not able to address fully either the history of biblical interpretation or the perspectives outlined in this volume. As required course work in practical theology continues to diminish, teachers of homiletics are left with one foundational preaching course, ensuring that continuing learning in biblical interpretation and method is essential for the faithful biblical preacher. Furthermore, seminary curricula typically are not consistent in helping students integrate biblical exegesis and biblical interpretation with a specific eye toward preaching.

The nature of this book points to a larger debate in biblical scholarship of "the relationship between *Wissenschaft* (primarily the historical-critical methodology) and contextual hermeneutics."[1] For the most part, preachers are still educated in the historical-critical method because it remains the controlling interpretive practice in biblical scholarship. The purpose of this book is not to contend for one approach

over another or to pit interpretive methods against each other. Nor is the intent of this book to eschew the historical-critical method. Rather, the perspectives presented in the following chapters make evident that "the historical-critical approach is not able to answer all of the questions we bring to the texts as readers."[2] The approaches summarized below both complexify and humanize biblical interpretation, representing a stance toward the Bible especially critical for preaching: the Bible is not simply a source for a sermon but a dialogue partner in our own meaning making. "We engage texts as constructs of their own reality, in whatever time period and with whatever ideological strategy they employ. We will construct a new reality of that ancient reading, using the tools of history, the social sciences, and engaging the readings of others, including an investigation of their social location, ideological agendas, and otherness."[3]

Addressing how the Bible gets read is, in part, a responsibility of the preacher. The preaching task often demands corrective and truth telling, where the preacher calls out interpretations of biblical texts that have been harmful, hurtful, and erroneous because self-interpretation and contextuality have been neglected or ignored. It is likely that the majority of people in our ministry settings unknowingly employ historical criticism when reading Scripture, where "meaning exists in the world behind the text as something to be extracted or excavated and . . . the interpreter of the text is a neutral party, who, at her or his best, is able to maintain objectivity, promote positivism, and support universality."[4] Our listeners are prone to presume that a biblical passage holds one meaning, even though logically they also know that preachers would be out of jobs if that were indeed the case. At the same time, our faithful hearers have experienced the phenomenon of how a passage can have different meanings at various points in and passages of their lives but are not able to articulate why this holds true. Preaching should regularly point out and address these changing interpretations.

Another way to articulate the tension outlined above is to speak about reading and objectivity, regardless of whether it is the Bible being read. While historically "biblical scholarship valorized objectivity in interpretation," recent trends in biblical interpretation "foreground the contributions of culture, faith, and identity." Whereas the dominant approach sought to compartmentalize "race, ethnicity, nationality, global positioning, gender, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability," contemporary interpretation marks "the turn toward real

flesh-and-blood readers" who bring "these dimensions of human experience to the forefront."[5] The more preaching honors the "flesh-and-blood" realities of our listeners, the more the faithful might see their contexts and locations as worthy of voice.

A cursory evaluation of preaching today exposes a general lack of biblical rigor, especially when it comes to evidence of engagement with approaches in biblical criticism beyond the historical-critical method. Conversations with preachers expose a dearth of continuing education in biblical interpretation and even shame around not keeping up with the latest trends in biblical studies. Rather than admit the need for further instruction, preachers continue their exegetical practices with minimal additional training, especially unaware of how developments in biblical scholarship are relevant for preaching. The hope is that with clear introductions to and applications of recent approaches in biblical interpretation, this book will demonstrate how these scholarly approaches make a difference for preaching and for ministry to and with the lives of faithful listeners.

The intention of this book is not simply to describe these approaches in biblical scholarship but also to establish how these approaches have significant homiletical impact. Knowing and using these approaches can make a marked difference in the quality and quantity of biblical presence in sermons, and this difference matters to the listeners. The preacher is accountable to the ways in which the Bible is heard and read, particularly outside of localized congregational comfort zones. How is the Bible interpreted by those beyond our immediate circle, congregation, and community? Preachers are also responsible for tending the biblical awareness of the congregation or community in which they do ministry. It is the preacher's job to bring communities of the faithful into dialogue with diverse interpreters of Scripture. Attention to trends in biblical scholarship can also address the perceived problem of biblical illiteracy in the church. Biblical illiteracy will not be solved by making sure our listeners know more about the Bible or have more information about theology. Rather, biblical literacy grows when the preacher models the reciprocity of Scripture and life. When current issues and approaches in biblical scholarship are taken seriously in preaching, the preacher gives witness to the open-ended ways in which God's people interact with God's Word. The hearers of our sermons have a better understanding of how the truths of our wide-ranging contexts make for a *living* Word.

WHY THIS BOOK

In a time when what the Bible says and means seems to be at the whim of the interpreter, it is critically important for the preacher to address the many viewpoints through which the Bible is read and interpreted. The reason is not only the homiletical consequence of such attention, but also pastoral concern. In our rapidly changing and challenging world, the faithful need to know that Scripture changes with the world; that the Bible is not a static document, but the living Word of God that continues to suggest new meanings of its age-old stories and for our lives. The focus of this book, therefore, is on the various cultural contexts that shape interpretation.

The sermon is never just information about God or what we are to understand about Jesus. The heart and soul of a sermon is an actual encounter with the living Christ, where the Word of God is reincarnated in the hearing and then embodied in the lives of the listeners. If preachers believe that the sermon is an event, then how they engage Scripture in the sermon should be demonstrative of this conviction. As a result, the Bible cannot merely be the subject matter of the sermon but that which animates and inspires listeners to engage in acts of interpretation. The best sermons invite the listeners to imagine that they themselves, like the voices they hear in the Bible, are worthy of contribution to the canon. While the canon may be closed, the diverse ways in which the Bible gets interpreted cannot be left to the so-called scholar alone. The preacher engages these different approaches in making sense of Scripture so that the listeners can see themselves as part of the conversation. As a result, interpreting the Bible becomes a dialogical process and listeners are then encouraged to believe that they are integral to such dialogue. There really is no sermon without their partnership in the conversation with the text.

Having a more generous stance to the varied approaches brought to the interpretation of the Bible also results in listeners being better readers of Scripture in general. Biblical preaching not only invites interpretive dialogue but also models nuance and dexterity in reading the Bible. Sermons are an act of empowerment, helping listeners embrace their own agency in meaning making, both of Scripture and of how God is working in their lives. Establishing that there are different approaches brought to the interpretation of Scripture, and that these approaches are valid, affirms that the listeners have a role in the interpretive enterprise.

Awareness of current trends in biblical interpretation also helps preachers grow in their own engagement with and trust in Scripture. The Bible is not simply the material on which sermons are based but bids new imagination about God and how God reveals God's self in the world. When preachers are more connected to Scripture and its diversity, they are better able to show how the Bible is an essential resource for making sense of our world, ourselves, and God's revelation to and in both.

As noted above, incorporating these varied approaches to interpreting the Bible into sermons communicates the multiple meanings that can be ascribed to a biblical passage. In theory, congregations and communities of faith might understand the multivalence of Scripture, and preachers suppose this truth simply by the fact that they preach manifold sermons on the same biblical passage and yet preach a different sermon each time around. At the same time, while preachers might be aware of this phenomenon, that awareness does not necessarily trickle down to the hearers. The more preachers can communicate *how* meaning happens, and that meaning changes depending on multiple issues, the more the hearers will be able to understand and navigate the many influences that shape how they interpret Scripture.

Intentional use of these different approaches in interpreting the Bible also functions as a critique of the hegemony of the white, male, cisgender, European representation in biblical scholarship. This hegemony means that the majority of the voices outlined in this book have yet to find any kind of mainstream attention in biblical interpretation. Instead, these approaches are still considered ideological, as if the dominant approach, the historical-critical method dictated by the authority of centuries of white, male perspectives, is free of bias. To put it another way,

> Precisely because perspective cannot be avoided, when it is not explicitly acknowledged the result is that a particular perspective takes on an aura of universality. Thus it happens that theology from a male perspective claims to be generally human, and that North Atlantic white theology believes itself to be "normal," while theologies from the so-called Third World or from ethnic minorities in the North Atlantic are taken to be contextual or perspectival.[6]

The truth is, "white interpreters have rarely reflected upon how culture and identity shape their own interpretive work." Because "whiteness" "does not function as an operative category," interpreters who

are white seldom "grapple with their own race and ethnicity in public ways."[7] For hearers to experience liberation from officious interpretations, and those that have typically silenced marginalized voices, the voices "left out of the biblical interpretive enterprise,"[8] the preacher must engage these different approaches. As a result, the listeners might actually hear themselves in the pages of Scripture. From this stance, "the Bible is a democratizing book. It is a collection of writings spanning the G*d-experience of many centuries, a book in which a rich plurality of 'citizen' voices argue with each other, complement each other, and keep alive the vision of divine justice, care, and well-being."[9]

Finally, at stake is the way the church itself has been complicit in sidelining minoritized perspectives in its preaching and teaching. Responsible preachers reflect on the limitations of their tradition, denominational commitments, and creedal and confessional statements, and ask where and how these authorities come under regular scrutiny for the sake of inclusion, diversity, and equity in interpretive representation. For the preacher, then, "drawing closer to marginalized people requires, first, an attitude of humility."[10] It involves remembering that, for the most part, we occupy the center and that "to be marginal means to be excluded from the center."[11] Historically, systems of the church, such as synods, judicatories, councils, and sessions, have not tended the variances in biblical interpretation, likely to protect and maintain their ecclesial distinctiveness within Christianity. It is the charge of the preacher to challenge these embedded majority perspectives toward honest and unifying dialogue among Christian expressions and even toward interreligious conversations. The truth is, "the world of biblical interpretation includes all kinds of people. Real people."[12]

WHAT TO EXPECT

Each chapter of this book includes a brief introduction to an approach; a summary of the key issues and components of the approach; an engagement of the approach with a sample text, specifically a passage from the Gospel of John assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary; and a summary of homiletical implications for the craft of preaching, for effective church leadership, and for pastoral ministry. The chapters close with a list of further resources for engaging the approach, especially with a view toward preaching. A full bibliography concludes the book.

An important caveat is in order here. The presentations of the different approaches included in this book are by no means exhaustive of the field. Contributions are constantly being added, representing the complexities of the contexts reflected in the approaches. As a result, readers might also ask, "Where is Native American interpretation? Where is . . . ?" Good. That is one of the hoped-for results of this project. At the end, we should be left asking, "Who else?" While the approaches set forth in this volume are those that have taken hold in academic circles, as soon as this book is published, there will be other voices and perspectives that need to be heard. Perspectives chosen for this volume are those that have wider consequences for homiletics and ministry.

The preacher is called to speak about and from God's Word as it intersects with the various issues and concerns of our multifaceted contexts. Familiarity and engagement with these perspectives are necessary not only for the sake of faithful biblical interpretation but also for faithful pastoral ministry.

1
Literary/Narrative Approaches

INTRODUCTION

This first chapter focuses on literary approaches to biblical interpretation because these approaches represent the beginning steps toward dismantling the monopoly of the historical-critical method in biblical interpretation. The turn toward literary features of biblical texts, and thereby also how a reader responds, shifted the location of meaning for the interpretive enterprise. Whereas the historical-critical method situated meaning "behind" the text, or saw the text as "window," literary approaches look for meaning "in" the text. By analyzing literary dimensions, characters, dialogue, plot, setting, poetry, and prose, they seek to view the text as a work of art. "The turn to literary interpretation also sets us free to enjoy the Bible's many examples of literary artistry."[1] As we will see, this shift then leads to investigation of meaning "around" the text or "in front of the text," where the current readers' experience of the text is determined by intersectional contexts.

When literary theory showed up as a character in the play of biblical studies, the whole production seemed to demand a remake. The plot thickened. Unexpected twists and turns kept even the most engaged scholar off guard. A play turned into a miniseries that then became a serial drama. What happened?

The first thing to note is what literary theory is not—a "breath of fresh air" kind of approach that reads for the "fun stuff" about

Scripture, such as setting, plot, and character development, thereby evading the complex historicity of the text. This understanding is lodged as a caution to preachers who, in search of "that'll preach," leave the historical behind. Literary critics are not *anti-* or *a*historical.[2] Two other misunderstandings of New Testament literary criticism are worth mentioning, especially since these misrepresentations can lead to the oversimplification of literary theory and the New Testament: first, that literary theory is only interested in the final form of the text and that it is bent on guarding the "literariness" of the text, especially the author's literary expertise. Second, that a literary approach in biblical interpretation can be a standardized method. The literary features, forms, and genres found in the Bible are impossibly vast to homogenize.

A brief introduction is an oxymoron when it comes to literary interpretation of the Bible but will have to suffice for the purposes of this book. No one avenue of approach offered by literary theory can exhaust the literary potential of a text. Indeed, "while each form of literary criticism may be valid within its own frame of reference, none on its own can account for the full range of interpretive horizons engendered by a given literary text."[3] The field is broad, wide, and deep. Nor is any theory ever a panacea. A word of caution is appropriate here, especially for homiletical sensitivities toward texts: theoretical concepts are "*not* to be introduced for their own sake or to be nit-picked endlessly, but to be applied to texts. They should sharpen and enrich our interpretation of texts. At the same time, theory should never become a straightjacket . . . the function of theory is to highlight textual complexity, not to straighten it out."[4]

For the sake of holding textual complexity, it is helpful to account for how literary criticisms (note the plural) entered the theater of biblical studies. While literary criticism emerged in biblical studies in the 1970s when biblical scholars began to adopt and adapt secular literary criticism in more formal ways,[5] "literary criticisms and theories span over 2,500 years of time and space."[6] Nothing of what surfaces in the field of biblical interpretation happens in a bubble. Biblical scholars do not just make stuff up; that which gets infused into the discipline reflects surrounding trends. In the case of literary theory, when postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s questioned the "metanarratives" assumed by modernism, the historical-critical method that had reigned in biblical scholarship since its formal inception also fell under scrutiny. This "so-called literary paradigm shift" hinged on the distinction

between "diachronic" and "synchronic" approaches to the interpretation of texts: diachronic analyses focusing on the "biblical texts as they've developed over time" and synchronic analyses "looking at a text as it is at a single moment in time."[7] It is this focus on synchronic literary approaches that moves biblical criticism along a trajectory of new questions and varied approaches based on the Bible as literature.

Of course, how to classify literature and literary theory becomes critical. Dinkler defines literature as "written poetry or prose that communicates through the use of specific linguistic techniques, and that is taken by society to be meaningful beyond its immediate context of origin." Correspondingly, then, literary theory "investigates the means by which humans make meaning through written poetry and prose."[8]

For biblical scholars, this embrace of various aspects of secular literary theory morphed into what became "narrative criticism," investigating features of biblical narratives namely narrator, point of view, time, plot, characters, and rhetorical features such as irony.[9] "Narrative criticism is a development within biblical scholarship which, though initially based on the theoretical studies of non-biblical literary critics . . . , has incorporated a variety of insights from these critics which have evolved into an eclectic form of literary criticism with no direct counterpart in non-biblical literary criticism."[10] In the end, a literary approach to biblical interpretation "offers the promise that, just as we all enjoy a good story, play, or film, we might also delight in the experience of reading the Bible."[11]

SUMMARY OF THE APPROACH

Without a taxonomy for literary approaches, navigating the field is unwieldy at best. For this discussion, therefore, we will lean on Dinkler's use of a scheme offered by Meyer Abrams, a diagrammatic structure "organized around four poles of interpretive polarization: An *author* composes a *text* for a *reader* about the *universe*."[12] Within these identifying poles, however, there is not a balance of attention, because "every critical approach to literature leans more heavily toward one orientation or another."[13] Having this taxonomy in mind is also essential when engaging any kind of theoretical perspective. That is, "theory, in all of its iterations, pushes us to recognize, first, the *power of normativity*, and second, the *necessity of critical reflexivity*."[14]

Dinkler describes four interpretive poles:

Mimetic, universe-oriented approach. From this pole, "the literary text imitates the world it portrays." It is looking for "what a text reports about its world."[15]

Expressive, author-oriented approach. These "expressive forms of criticism locate the meaning of a literary text in the message that its author intended to convey."[16] Phrases such as "authorial intent" are connected with this approach. In the world of biblical interpretation, scholars who focus on this approach examine the literary features of a text to "discern its ancient author's (or final redactor's) original intentions."[17] Under this label appears rhetorical criticism, with which scholars try to achieve a better understanding of the movement of the author's thought, intent, and message.[18] Examining an author's use of and purpose for specific rhetorical devices, such as irony, for example, would also fall under this category.

Work-oriented, objective approach. These approaches "deal with the literary text as an object of study in its own right." To be clear, they are not called "objective" because they are "without presupposition or bias, but because they consider the meaning of a work to be independent of its relation to reality, independent of its author's intent, and independent of its audience's responses."[19] In biblical interpretation, scholars who follow this approach have adopted the "literary subfield of narratology" to develop "narrative criticism."[20]

Pragmatic, audience-oriented approach. This approach has as its "main focus the literary text's effects upon its audience/s." In classical rhetoric, this approach can also represent the art of persuasion, though not every rhetorical piece intends to be suasive. Biblical critics who have adopted this approach often describe their work as "reader-response" criticism. There is, therefore, "greater emphasis on the audience's constitutive role in meaning-making as a social construction."[21]

As helpful as this taxonomy is for organizing the vast array of literary approaches appropriated by biblical scholarship, the astute reader quickly realizes the false assurances of categorization. Overlap is inevitable. But at the very least, we have a way forward that might demonstrate how "the tools provided for interpretation presume the type of interpretation that should be produced." Another access point into the world of literary theory and the Bible is to remember that literary theory tends to three "sets of issues: hermeneutical matters (how language

functions, where textual meaning resides); evaluative concerns (how we assess the literary value of a text); metadisciplinary views (what critics ought to be reading and doing vis-à-vis the literary)."[22]

Out of the intersection of literary approaches and cultural sensitivities, that is, the pragmatic, audience-oriented approach, is born the approaches that are reviewed in the remaining chapters of this book. For the sake of clarity, but trying not to border on tedium, below are three literary paradigms that preachers might employ in their sermon preparation. Having the capacity to identify these approaches helps in our readerly expectations. Don't ask a commentator to tell you what that commentator is not interested in giving you.

Using the four-pole taxonomy as guide, the first paradigm is the *formalist literary paradigm*, which "focuses on the autonomous literary form of the text as it stands."[23] These approaches fall under work-oriented, objective approaches. Under this rubric, meaning cannot be determined apart from the form. The form is not a benign feature of the text. To distinguish even further, in biblical studies, "form critics are interested in the *earliest forms* of the NT texts and tradition, while literary formalists focus on a text's *extant form* (from any given point in time)."[24] We might make the comparison to taking into consideration the form that is a parable or the form that is an existing overall narrative.

The second literary paradigm is *structuralism*, "which assumes that universal principles structure human communication." Put another way, meaning is found in the "invisible design of language itself . . . with the universal codes and conventions that make such a work possible."[25] Under this paradigm exist studies such as narratology, genre theory, Marxism, Neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis, and even feminism. The overall point of structuralist interest is "the hermeneutical conviction that texts function according to universal deep structures."[26] An interpretive task within this paradigm is to describe the structures at work in a text that are determinative of meaning.

A third literary paradigm is what Dinkler describes as *poststructuralism and beyond*. The definition that one might ascribe to poststructuralism is likely correct on the first guess—the rejection of "stable underlying structures of language" and any claims of "totality and universality."[27] By embracing particularism, poststructuralism calls into question the underpinnings of language as a priori. "Poststructuralists stress that because humans perceive the world from our own partial and particular points of view, our perceptions of reality necessarily

change according to shifts in time, location, and culture. People make sense and draw connections—that is to say, people *mean*—differently."[28] Born out of this belief came "a 'new species' of literary criticism" recognized as "identity-based approaches,"[29] which include third-wave feminism, womanism, gender studies, queer theory, and the circumstances of race, ethnicity, cultures, territories, and nations in literature (postcolonial criticism falls under this category). Postcolonial approaches, specifically as they focus on particular ethnicities and cultures, include African American, Native American, Asian, and Latinx criticisms.

Poststructuralism and beyond has been the cause of great consternation and resistance, particularly within the field of biblical interpretation. Critics claim that this is reading the Bible with an "agenda" or leads one down the slippery slope of relativism. The point is, of course, that all reading, all meaning making, is subjectively determined. While complex, "literary matters are at the heart of NT interpretation." Literary theory is a "labyrinthine land"[30] but a necessary adventure for anyone who wishes to make public interpretations of biblical texts. And an adventure it is, inviting us to "savor the pleasure of literature well written," allowing and pondering the gaps in the story, setting aside our insistences on "what really happened," and expecting to "experience irony, suspense, and surprise."[31]

Where does this leave us? Identity-based approaches within literary criticism will have their individual chapters below as each asks its own specific questions that demand our nuanced attention. For the rest of this chapter, the focus will be on literary interpretation that represents the work-oriented, objective approach, with an eye toward the formalist literary paradigm.

A balcony view might serve as an apt conclusion to this section:

> Biblical literature embodies the cultural moment in which it arises. In this, it's like all literature—looking ahead to new possibility and looking back to lessons from the past. Literature can challenge the presumptions of our predecessors, pushing us to imagine new possibilities and inspiring us to pursue new ways of being. And literature can uphold the status quo, authorizing us to cling to our biases and look away from injustice.[32]

Preachers might well ask themselves, then, How will I define biblical literature? What do I want this literature to be, to do? Honest answers to those questions move us further toward ethical preaching.

SAMPLE TEXT: JOHN 13–17

With all that has been stated above, bringing a literary approach, or approaches, to a passage in John could result in an entire book. Selectivity is essential, along with a substantive dose of reflexivity. Because the majority of this book is dedicated to the second and third paradigms, structuralism and poststructuralism and beyond, the analysis in this chapter will focus on the first one, the formalist literary paradigm.

Another way to identify this approach is Mark Allan Powell's "ordering of events" and "duration and frequency of events" in narrative analysis. "The order in which a narrative relates events is important because readers are expected to consider each new episode in light of what has gone before." As for duration and frequency, "Reader's perceptions concerning the events of a narrative may be influenced by the amount of space given to reporting individual episodes or by the number of times that a particular event is referenced in the narrative."[33]

The sample text for this exercise is the Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John (John 13–17).[34] The literary form or genre of the discourse itself is important to note up front. Jesus' final words to his disciples have been compared to other farewell addresses in ancient literature, from both Jewish and Greco-Roman sources. In the Old Testament, farewell words are offered by Jacob (Gen. 49), Joseph (Gen. 50), Moses (Deut. 31–32), Joshua (Josh. 24), and David (1 Chr. 29). In the New Testament, Acts 20 presents Paul's farewell.

Scholars set out differing parameters for the Farewell Discourse, depending on whether they include the footwashing in John 13. It is tempting to begin the discourse at 14:1, the convenient chapter demarcation, yet as chapters, verses, paragraphing, and punctuation did not exist in the original manuscripts of the New Testament, one could argue for the start of the discourse at 13:31, where, after Judas's departure, Jesus begins to interpret the "sign" he just performed with and for his disciples, that is, the footwashing, and the signs that are yet to come (the crucifixion and resurrection).

Regardless of specific verse decisions, the length and location of the Farewell Discourse in John is worth discussion. While chapters 1–12 (often titled the Book of Signs) span the three-year ministry of Jesus, chapters 13–21 narrate the events of roughly one week, with chapters 13–17 given over to one night. A narrative block of five chapters devoted to the last night Jesus has with his disciples reinforces the poignancy of the moment. The narrative space dedicated to Jesus'

last words and last hours with his disciples demands an interpretive approach that mimics the elongation of time. We cannot rush through these chapters for the sake of an interpretive end. Rather, the length of Jesus' final address almost halts time; it invites readers to hang on Jesus' every word, just as his disciples needed to. The Farewell Discourse is an interruption of the narrative flow, the plot, of the Gospel. We are forced to stop and to take seriously the effect of this interruption on the meaning of the words themselves.

The Farewell Discourse, Jesus' final words to his disciples before his arrest in John 18, is unique to John's Gospel. Many of the Gospel's themes find expression in the discourse, and, in that regard, the discourse serves as Jesus' interpretation of his entire ministry. A literary-critical approach might elicit a vast number of hermeneutical possibilities, but this analysis will be limited to one example of how the narratology of a text communicates meaning. Or, to say it differently, how "the narrative mode makes a theological claim."[35] Specifically, we will look at the structure and occurrence of the Paraclete passages in the Farewell Discourse and what this formal structure communicates for the interpretation of the role of the Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel.

While there have been references to the Spirit in the narrative up to this point (1:32–33; 3:5, 6, 8, 34; 4:23, 24; 6:63; 7:39; 11:33), the focused exposition of John's pneumatology is located in the Farewell Discourse. For the first time, the Holy Spirit is identified as Paraclete (*paraklētos*). This compound word made up of *para* (alongside) and *klētos*, from the verb *kaleō* (to call), denotes the spirit as "the one who is called alongside." This distinctive pneumatological image is translated numerous ways—advocate, comforter, companion, counselor, helper, aide, guide—in contemporary English translations of the New Testament. Interpretation of the Paraclete and John's pneumatology from a literary approach must consider why the introduction and development of the Holy Spirit as Paraclete occurs here in the narrative.

With such a consideration in mind, we note how and where the Paraclete is present. In response to the troubling spirit of the moment, Jesus says, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever" (14:16). Before Jesus' promise of the gift of the Paraclete, Judas has betrayed Jesus by exiting the room: "Immediately he went out. And it was night" (13:30). Judas's abandonment of his relationship with Jesus—and his relationship with his fellow disciples—has been the subject of the conversation thus far. After the footwashing, Jesus predicts Judas's departure. "After saying this

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me'" (v. 21). The disciples look around at each other, wondering, Who could it be? The abandonment by Judas is contrasted with the abiding of the disciple whom Jesus loves, first introduced into the narrative in 13:23: "One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him." Immediately on the heels of Judas's betrayal is Jesus' command to love one another (vv. 31–35), which also contains Jesus' announcement that he is leaving: "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'" (v. 33). This is followed by yet another cause for troubled hearts, the foretelling of Peter's denial (vv. 36–38). It is into these multiple losses that Jesus gives the promise of the Paraclete, the one who will accompany the disciples in Jesus' absence. Any understanding of the role of the Paraclete and John's pneumatology demands careful attention to this literary context. The Paraclete will have a very specific purpose because of the narrative space in which the Paraclete is introduced.

A formalist literary approach also observes that the discussion of the Holy Spirit occurs in three distinct locations in the Farewell Discourse. The first has been discussed above (14:15–17, 25–26). The second presentation of the Paraclete is in chapter 15 (vv. 26–27) and the third in chapter 16 (vv. 4b–15). With these three separate locations spread out over the course of Jesus' farewell words, the Paraclete, the one who is called to be alongside the disciples, literarily accompanies them. Positioning Jesus' promise of the Paraclete in each chapter of the Farewell Discourse underscores the purpose and identity of the Paraclete as accompanier, as companion. The narrative mode, the form that the pneumatological discourse takes on, reinforces the theological claim.

Once this formal structure is determined, the surrounding narrative takes on new meaning as well. Each pneumatological discourse follows moments of deep distress for the disciples and for Jesus. The first introduction of the Paraclete succeeds the betrayal of Judas, the foreshadowing of Peter's denial, Jesus' initial intimations of his departure, and Thomas's desperate plea, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5). In chapter 15, the promise of the Paraclete ensues from Jesus' words about the world's hatred and impending persecution of both Jesus and his disciples (vv. 18–24). The third pneumatological discourse follows the third reference in the Fourth Gospel to being "put out of the synagogue" (16:2). In chapter 9, this is the fear of the parents of the man born blind. "His parents

said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him'" (9:22–23). Their concern reflects that of the Johannine community, followers of Jesus, believing him to be the Messiah, who were likely cast out of their synagogue for this confession.[36] Each promise of the presence and activity of the Paraclete arises from the most troubling words of Jesus about his future and the future of the disciples. The narrative locations of the promise of the Paraclete give emphasis to John's unique pneumatology, a pneumatology that understands the Holy Spirit as the companion to the faithful, who will accompany believers in what lies ahead.

HOMILETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Reading the Bible as literature is compelling. There is an inherent allure when it comes to literary approaches and the interpretation of the Bible. Who doesn't love a good story? Furthermore, "Literary interpretation promises to make the Bible more accessible to non-specialists."[37] A sermon is neither an exegetical paper nor a report on the preacher's prowess, but is, in part, an invitation into a storied world filled with a variety of characters, plot twists and turns, intriguing settings, captivating details, and narrative flourish. When the preacher tends the literary features of a biblical text, already the passage will take on a kind of appeal as Scripture becomes something more than a dictionary for faith or a book of rules. The Gospel writers are, all of a sudden, messengers of truth as "imaginative, creative crafters of art."[38]

A literary approach is a source of empowerment for the listener. As noted in the introduction, the advent of literary interpretation of the Bible also brought attention to the response of the reader, with the idea that the text does not hold an inherent and unchangeable meaning, but meaning happens between text and reader. The reader is not a passive recipient of information but an active agent in meaning making. At the same time, textual instability may be a frightening prospect for many in our pews. When the dominant Christian voices posit textual inerrancy and readerly objectivity, suggesting that readers have an interpretive role beyond, or in place of, discovering the text's nugget of gospel truth could very well lead to opposition and rejection. Negotiating this terrain will necessitate some pastoral sensitivity. We have a long way to go toward egalitarian interpretation of the Bible.

Pointing out narrative features in a biblical text suggests to the hearers that they can do the same. A seminary degree is not a prerequisite for interpreting the Bible. People can approach Scripture with the same curiosity and anticipation as they would a novel, even venturing meaning as they would for their favorite genre of literature. Geographical notations become places of and for meaning—what is Jesus doing in Sychar, of all places? Did he really have to go through Samaria to get to Galilee from Jerusalem (4:1–6)? Biblical people become subjects of characterization. What do we make of Nicodemus and his role in the story (3:1–21; 7:45–52; 19:38–42)? Differences in plot are cause for investigation—why is the temple incident in chapter 2 of John and not at the end of Jesus' public ministry, as in the Synoptic Gospels? A narrative detail stops the flow of reading and pulls us up short—why did the woman leave her water jar behind at the well (4:28)? Appreciation for the literary artistry of the biblical writers might lead to a different kind of engagement with the Bible, one that is more dialogical, like sitting down over a cup of coffee with a good conversation partner.

At the same time, an egalitarian hermeneutic also means that preachers will have to give up control of the narrative. This requires coming to terms with one's own assumed or hoped-for meanings in texts and acknowledging one's own understanding of the authority of Scripture and one's theological biases. Such self-reflection is rarely altogether pleasant, but it is necessary for homiletical honesty. And yet, letting go of control is precisely what happens anyway, regardless of our best efforts to keep things in check. We know instinctively that listeners hear what they need or want to hear and then eagerly share what they heard, which is rarely what the speaker intended.

Literary approaches can also be a fount of encouragement for the preacher who longs for wonder when it comes to interpreting the Bible. So often preoccupied by the search for the meaning of a text that will yield a sermon, preachers set aside imagination for results. Interpreting the Bible as literature might spark renewed enthusiasm for engaging Scripture, perhaps even a reorientation of the preacher's relationship with God's Word. Allowing ourselves to be caught up in our curiosities also slows down our reading. Pushing to the end of a pericope will not necessarily yield a sermon focus. Meaning can be found in the smallest of details, which are often overlooked in our quest for a homiletical point or our assumption that a sermon must cover the entirety of the biblical passage set before us. At the same time, a literary sensitivity is not sought for the sake of itself but for what it generates theologically.

The goal is not pointing out a narrative detail, but realizing how that narrative detail reinforces or gives meaning to a theological claim.

The Farewell Discourse as a genre, as Jesus' final words to his disciples, sets out thematic and interpretive expectations for meaning and preaching. The purpose and tone of Jesus' last speech to his followers should determine the same for the sermon. That is, a sermon on the Farewell Discourse should imitate the genre's intent and mood. When a sermon lacks this kind of biblical alignment, the text's homiletical potential is not fully reached. One might even ask if a sermon is biblical if it does not pay attention to the "how" of the text and not just the "what." Noting the formal structure of the pneumatological discourses within the Farewell Discourse affirms the pneumatology of John as a whole. The Fourth Evangelist offers a unique understanding of the person and role of the Holy Spirit as the one who will accompany the disciples in Jesus' absence. A preacher might feel encouraged to preach the specificity of John's pneumatology when the narrative mode is recognized as supporting the theological claim. In this regard, the preacher is faithful to John's pneumatology when the pull toward harmonization is ever more potent if a doctrine of the church is at stake, especially on a day like Pentecost.

In a related manner, attention to the literary and narrative components of biblical texts is a counteraction to the dominant experience of the Bible in our churches—pericopes dislodged from their narrative homes. Resituating a passage into its literary context has the potential to address biblical illiteracy, to correct misinterpretations when texts are removed from their contexts, and to prod new interpretive possibilities when connections are made between the part and the whole, between the whole and the part. When "the Bible says" is common parlance, it is the preacher's responsibility to respond, "But where, why, when, to whom, and for what purpose?" What hermeneutical and homiletical possibilities have been shortchanged because a passage has been wrenched from its literary context? It is part of our calling to help listeners to be better readers of the Bible, which demands dogged faithfulness, responsibility, and accountability.

Another homiletical observation when it comes to literary approaches and biblical interpretation is to notice how the interpretive polarization taxonomy presented in the "Summary of the Approach" section mirrors what the preacher might know as the Rhetorical Triangle. As a form of rhetoric, homiletics moves about the Rhetorical Triangle. The homiletical project is a constant conversation between the text, or logos

(mimetic/objective); the community/audience, or pathos (pragmatic); and the preacher/speaker, the ethos or artist (expressive). While literary critics of the Bible might have the luxury to choose on which pole to stake an argument, the preacher is not as fortunate. A sermon falls flat or does not "fit" when one of these angles is left out of our inherited homiletical geometry. In homiletical terms, preachers constantly have in mind their own character (preacher/speaker/ethos/artist) and what will be revealed about, what is at stake for, their character in the sermon. Preachers read the biblical text and engage the world through the eyes and ears and hearts of their congregations or ministry communities (community/audience/pathos). The sermon is always for a particular place and people, and not for general consumption. Preachers are charged with a specific object for or of the sermon as a rhetorical event, and that object/subject matter/material is the Word (mimetic/object/logos). The subject matter for a sermon, however, is not an object but a person, the revelation of God in Jesus, the Word made flesh, which distinguishes a sermon from a speech.

Literary approaches warrant some homiletical cautions. These concerns are not meant to scare the preacher off from this appealing approach, but to call attention to the ways in which we preachers are beholden to a kind of normativity for Scripture that is caught up in the holy. That is, the Bible is not just or simply literature, but is communication of, from, and about the Divine. The preacher, the interpreter, navigates a fine line between aesthetic expectations and theological meaning. Even our leanings toward certain translations betray an assumption of the pleasingness of Scripture because of what it communicates—a divine presence. Testifying to the holy should be beautiful. At the same time, layers of denominational demography, ecclesial history, and ideological systems often hold sway, preventing us from believing that theological meaning can happen outside of concrete confessional and creedal claims. This means that we must name the expectations we have of biblical texts that might cause us to bracket them off from analytical or theoretical methods, a reminder appropriate for all approaches set forth in this book.

FURTHER RESOURCES FOR PREACHING

Graves, Mike, and David Schlafer, eds. *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008.