Singing and Suffering with the Servant: Isaiah as Guide for Preaching the Old Testament

by

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Date: 12-1-19

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in The Divinity School of Duke University

2019
ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that domination in its many forms (political, economic, cultural, theological) continues to significantly affect Old Testament hermeneutics and homiletics. Those who write about preaching the Old Testament frequently depict the Old Testament as a sort of Suffering Servant—despised, rejected, and acquainted with grief. However, as a review of literature in chapter 2 shows, despite the helpful strategies and insights offered by homileticians who write on Old Testament preaching, the majority do not significantly address larger issues of domination and marginalization in their treatment of these texts. By contrast, a close reading of the four Suffering Servant Songs as preaching in chapter 3 highlights several key ways in which domination affected, and continues to affect, homiletical approaches to the Old Testament. These insights are developed further in chapter 4 by reflection on the work of Alexander Deeg, a German, Christian homiletician learning from Jewish hermeneutics and working to undo centuries of Christian domination. Examination of recent leading African American homileticians in chapter 5 also shows a long-standing and developing homiletic that frequently draws on the Old Testament to respond directly to contexts of injustice.

Preaching the Old Testament with an awareness of ancient and contemporary domination leads to a different homiletic approach. The Old Testament becomes an ally and example for combatting marginalization and a model for proclaiming older texts in new contexts. Further, Second Isaiah’s use of the Servant trope, Alexander Deeg’s work on preaching in the presence of Jews, and the witnesses of African American preaching invite Christian proclamation that focuses on undoing the oppression of othering,
preaches with the Spirit, announces the Liberating, Creator God, and engages messianism without being anti-Jewish. These approaches demonstrate that the Old Testament sings good news, especially in contexts of suffering and domination.
To Sarah and Elijah.
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Acknowledgements

One of the gifts of writing a dissertation is that it makes you keenly aware of how many people have blessed, pushed, carried, and otherwise enabled you to do this work along the way. I am so thankful for these people in my life—many of whom I name here.

I want to begin by thanking the leadership of the North Carolina Conference of the UMC for encouraging me to pursue doctoral work as a part of my vocation to ministry. Special thanks to Bill Gattis, John Strother, and Bishop Hope Morgan Ward whose mentoring has been transformative and whose leadership not only enabled my return to graduate school but made it so grace-filled.

Thank you to the people of Highland United Methodist Church who have consistently encouraged my teaching, preaching and leadership and who have offered so much love and support to my family and me. Thanks to my ministry colleagues at Highland: to David Goehring, who has become as dear as family, to Charlie Baber whose own creativity and dreams are an inspiration, and to Amy Takahashi whose truth telling and genuine care have been such a blessing. And, special thanks to the Lockett’s, Atkins’s, Baucom’s, Mottershead’s, and Takahashi’s who graciously welcomed me into their homes when I was on study-leave finishing the final chapter of writing.

Thank you to friends and colleagues at Universität Leipzig. Special thanks to Henni Acksteiner and to Iris and Paul Marsh and their family for adding so much joy and friendship to our lives. Thanks to Anne Gidion for your encouragement, inspiration, and friendship. And, great thanks to Ferenc Herzig whose friendship, hospitality, persistent
advocacy through German bureaucracy, and homiletical insight made our time in Leipzig comfortable and fruitful.

Thank you to the students, faculty, and leadership of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Thanks to the Styberg Preaching Institute for a generous grant that supported my homiletical writing and teaching. Thanks to Andrew Wymer and Jaewoong Jung for your friendship. And, great thanks to Gennifer Brooks who has pushed me and advocated for me as passionately as anyone.

Thank you to my dissertation committee for your guidance and grace. Thanks to Thea Portier-Young for your fierce brilliance and consistent encouragement over two decades now. I am a better writer and scholar because of you. Thanks to Luke Powery for patiently and persistently putting a song in my heart and into my homiletical writing. Special thanks to Alexander Deeg, whose hospitality and friendship make Leipzig feel like a second home. Your mentoring continues to expand my teaching and writing, and your homiletical insight continues to inspire me. Tremendous thanks to Chuck Campbell who made all of this happen. Your steady compassion, wise counsel, gracious spirit, and creative homiletical insight have blessed me in so many ways.

Thank you to the Divinity School and to Duke University. From the first day I set foot on campus over twenty years ago, Duke has been a place of thick grace and deep learning. Thanks to Jim Crenshaw, who first encouraged me to pursue doctoral work and to Will Willimon who helped me return to doctoral work. Special thanks to Matt Schlimm and Jeremy Troxler—two dear friends from our M.Div. days who have continued to fill my life with joy and wisdom.
Thank you to the students, faculty, and leadership of the School of Theology at the University of the South. You have given me time to write, been a helpful sounding board for ideas developed within this project, helped me with editing, and celebrated the dissertation’s completion. It has been a joy to teach, write, live, and worship among you these last two years.

Finally, thank you to my parents, Dave and Tina, who have been a constant source of love and support. From the time you first carried me around the campus of Purdue University as a toddler you have been exposing me to cultural and educational opportunities, inspiring me to dream, and supporting my academic pursuits every step of the way. Thank you to Deborah and Charlie Ralston for your love and support, for making space for me to work at the beach or in Indiana, and for loving on my family while I was researching and writing. Thanks to my son, Elijah, who not only prayed for me every night until I finished my dissertation but was the first to plan the celebration after I finished. You bring so much joy and love into my life. And, innumerable thanks to my wife, Sarah. Your patience, steadiness, flexibility, wisdom, empathy, encouragement and love are a tremendous blessing that is only second to the joy of getting to share life with you. You have been with me through sorrowful and trying times. What a gift to be with you now at the completion of this milestone when we can know something of the prophet Isaiah’s hope: “For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace” (Isaiah 55:12).
1. Introduction: Isaiah as Guide to Old Testament Preaching

“Indeed, too much is often made of the difference between our times and the old time. Do what we will, Bible history all too easily assumes the color of a dream, a fairy tale, a ‘sweet story of old.’”¹ —H. Grady Davis, 1958

“The Old Testament is much misunderstood. For many Christians, some ministers included, it is a lost book. And for nearly all the rest it is a neglected book.”² —Dwight Stevenson, 1961

“The Church through its history has either neglected or misused the Old Testament.”³ —David Noel Freedman, 1973

“It is fair to say that the Old Testament is largely a lost book in many parts of the U.S. church.”⁴ —Elizabeth Achtemeier, 1989

“Through the centuries, expositors of the Hebrew Bible have implied or stated a similar conviction: the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, was just that: old, antiquated, past its day, slightly (or greatly) embarrassing to Christians.”⁵ —John Holbert and Ron Allen, 1995

“There is not a lot of Old Testament preaching done these days, at least not in European-American churches.”⁶ —Ellen Davis, 2005

“There is a corresponding ignorance in our congregations not only of the content of the Old Testament, but also of the prodigious God whom it sets forth.”⁷ —Flemming Rutledge, 2011

Those who write about preaching the Old Testament so regularly lament the Testament’s lack of use in the Church that one might assume lament is a required trope for the genre. Reviewer after reviewer notes that these scriptures are neglected, misunderstood, or otherwise off-putting for Christian preaching. Despite the intentional effort of scholars to counter such readings in every decade since the Shoah, the Old Testament continues to be perceived like the servant in Second Isaiah: despised, rejected, and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3).

1.1. The Old Testament as a Suffering Servant

As many have observed, the Old Testament is despised within significant segments of the Church. Elizabeth Achtemeier describes the situation by noting that the Old Testament is largely “unknown and unimportant” to the Church, something like “an unopened antique book from the distant past that can safely be left with the other antiques on the curio shelf.” It is as if the Old Testament “had no form or majesty that we should look at him” (Isaiah 53:2). Even a cursory review of the Revised Common Lectionary confirms the Old Testament’s low standing in the Church. Not only are there few opportunities to preach through an Old Testament book continuously, as one would with many of the New Testament books, including the synoptic gospels, not only do most Old Testament passages serve primarily as antitype to Gospel readings, but an entire season of the church year, Easter, does not include any readings outside of the Psalter. In fact, according to Robert Wozniak’s estimate, the lectionary includes only “6 percent of the

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Old Testament (not counting the Psalms).”⁹ And, this dearth of Hebrew scripture in the RCL is actually an improvement on earlier lectionaries!

Often what is less noticed is how many textbooks from the last generations of homileticians nearly reject the Old Testament as a source for insight and reflection on preaching.¹⁰ For instance, Tom Long’s *The Witness of Preaching*—cites the New Testament three times more than the Old Testament. In nearly five hundred pages of his book, *Homiletic*, David Buttrick cites the Old Testament only eighteen times. Fred Craddock’s *As One Without Authority* develops a narrative approach to preaching that barely treats the Old Testament—much less its narratives.¹¹ H. Grady Davis offers three times more New Testament sermons than Old and comes close to including more overall references to the works of Shakespeare than to the writings of Old Testament authors.¹² And, while Karl Barth’s *Homiletics* encourages Old Testament preaching and lifts up

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¹⁰ Paul Scott Wilson’s recent expansion of his trouble-and-grace paradigm, highlights a related problem. When Wilson writes about how to find good news in difficult texts, he focuses solely upon the Old Testament, but when he turns to amplifying good news he writes about the New Testament. To find good news in Old Testament texts, Wilson suggests that the preacher use textual inversion (i.e., deconstruct the Old Testament text’s assumptions and attitudes) or textual extension (i.e., keep reading in the Old Testament until you find good news) (Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 13). To begin a brief study of preaching the Old Testament with the problem of “preaching grace if the text seems to have none” is itself problematic. This implies—despite the author’s intentions—that the Old Testament is largely a text that seems to have no grace. Furthermore, the overall structure of Wilson’s book implies that the Old Testament is insignificant. Wilson writes 40 pages on the Old Testament versus 114 pages on the New Testament.


¹² H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 306.
Psalm 119 as reflective of the preacher’s situation, the majority of Barth’s comments here disparage and supersede the Old Testament.\(^\text{13}\) For instance, Barth says, “the Old Testament is valid only in relation to the New.”\(^\text{14}\) In all these examples, the Old Testament seems to be “despised and rejected by others” (Isaiah 53:3).

Brent Strawn finds a similar rejection of the Old Testament in many segments of North American Christian preaching, hymnic, and lectionary practices. While more illustrative than probative, Strawn’s examination of Old Testament preaching from three collections of “Best Sermons” from 1924-27, 1940-1968, and 1998-1994 finds that only 21% of sermons were based on an Old Testament text alone.\(^\text{15}\) By comparison, 49% of sermons featured the New Testament alone and an astounding 23% of “Best Sermons” focused upon no text in particular.\(^\text{16}\) Strawn also highlights W. Sibley Towner’s study of mainline hymnology, which shows a significant lack of use of the Psalms to shape current liturgical music.\(^\text{17}\) And of the Psalms that are used, most elevate the role of good news and neglect the presence of lament.\(^\text{18}\) So too, Strawn finds that the RCL offers a


\(^{14}\) Ibid., 80. In the same lecture Barth also says, “Preaching must bring out what the Old Testament passage actually says, but in a way that affirms the basic premise on which the church adopted the Old Testament” (80).

\(^{15}\) Brent Strawn, *The Old Testament is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 31.

\(^{16}\) Ibid. 31.


\(^{18}\) Strawn 41.
“greatly reduced” number of texts and perspectives from the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, as the people speak of the servant in Isaiah 53, so European-American congregations seem to say of the Old Testament: “we hid as it were our faces from him” (KJV, Isaiah 53:3).

Strawn believes that the situation is dire. As he diagnoses it, the Old Testament is dying…or at least it is a dying language.\textsuperscript{20} By this Strawn means that for many North American Christians

\begin{quote}
…the Old Testament has ceased to function in healthy ways in their lives as sacred, authoritative, canonical literature. These individuals—or in some cases, groups of individuals (even entire churches)—do not regard the Old Testament in the same way (or as highly) as the New Testament, do not understand the Old Testament, would prefer to do without the Old Testament, and for all practical purposes do exactly that by means of their neglect and ignorance of it, whether in private devotion or public worship or both.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Intended or not, this “censorship” of the Old Testament implies that the Old Testament is “dangerous in some way, or off-putting and offensive, maybe even non-Christian.”\textsuperscript{22} Such an implication risks the rejection of the Old Testament in total.

As Strawn indicates, this rejection is rooted in the belief that the Old Testament is a book “of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (KJV, Isaiah 53:3) in its narratives and theologies. On the one hand, Marcionite and nouveau-Marcionite readings of the God of the Old Testament as violent and judgmental continue to shape the way many Christians read scripture.\textsuperscript{23} Matthew Schlimm captures this perspective in contemporary parlance

\begin{footnotes}
\item[19] Ibid. 55.
\item[20] Ibid. 4.
\item[21] Ibid. 4-5.
\item[22] Ibid. 53. Strawn asserts that the rejected and dying Old Testament is a portent of what may be to come with for the New Testament as well (18).
\item[23] Marcion (c. 85-160 CE) held the dualist belief that the God of the Hebrew scriptures was wrathful and violent while the God of the New Testament was forgiving and loving.
\end{footnotes}
when he describes the thoughts many Christians have about the Old Testament: “Even if we can stomach the debauchery of Old Testament characters, we face a new set of challenges when confronted with the Old Testament’s violence….Perhaps most disturbing of all, God sometimes commands the Israelites to kill everything that breathes.”\(^{24}\) Importantly, Schlimm advocates that such a reading of the Old Testament is cursory and hardly reflective of the way these texts function within communities as a “friend in faith.”\(^{25}\) Still, that Schlimm needs to advocate for Christians to “wrestle” with something “Strange” and “Sacred”—or said differently: odd and other—speaks to the challenges that grow out of the Old Testament’s acquaintance with grief and suffering.

On the other hand, Marcionite readings of scripture are used to justify the connection between these texts and perpetuation of suffering—especially Jewish suffering. As John Holbert has observed:

> wherever Marcion is spending his eternity, a smile may regularly cross his face. For in pulpits of the twenty-first century, little is heard from the Old Testament, save Isaiah at Christmas and Easter, and the Jewish portions of the New Testament are too often used as evil foils for the ‘right-thinking’ Jesus, who came along to save us from all that Jewish stuff. I caricature, but not that much.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{25}\) Ibid. 5.

Fleming Rutledge holds that equating the Old Testament with a “wrathful and judgmental God” who is eventually overtaken by “an endlessly tolerant and indulgent Jesus” is “not exactly anti-Semitic, but it can be called into the service of anti-Semitism.”

Unfortunately, this way of interpreting scripture is not relegated to fringe Christian groups. Far too often these Marcionite readings are subtly perpetuated by important ecclesial and theological leaders. For instance, in his primer on some of the foundational elements of Christian faith, Archbishop Rowan Williams writes,

One of the great tragedies and errors of the way people have understood the Bible has been the assumption that what people did in the Old Testament must have been right ‘because it’s in the Bible.’ It has justified violence, enslavement, abuse and suppression of women, murderous prejudice against gay people; it has justified all manner of things we now cannot but as Christians regard as evil.

It is important to note here that in the quote above the pronoun “it” refers to “assumption” rather than to the Old Testament. Nevertheless, it is striking that Williams frames problematic readings that do violence to others as an issue of Old Testament interpretation. He even writes that what people did in the Old Testament is recorded as God’s way of telling us, “when I speak to human beings things can go very wrong.”

Then, Williams’ solution to problematic readings is presented as a matter for New Testament hermeneutics. He suggests that the Bible be read as a parable of Jesus. One wonders where this leaves the Old Testament.

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27 Rutledge 6.
29 Williams also adds that it can also go “very wonderfully” 29.
30 Ibid. 29.
1.2. Toward a Constructive Understanding of Old Testament

It should be noted that even the term, Old Testament, is ambiguous. The earliest evidence suggests that Christians began to use “Old Testament” to refer to the scriptures that Jews and Christians hold in common within 40 years after Marcion. Thus the term Old Testament could be a sign of Marcionite influence within the Church, reflective of Christian discomfort with these texts in light of Jewish interpretative claims. For instance, in a study on early Christian views of Jewish proclamation, Annette von Stockhausen observes,

The Christians had a problem: They relate to the Bible as a holy book—as do the Jews. But unlike them, they have it only in a translation and there were repeated controversies on the right wording of the text. Christians therefore always had a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the Jews."

Such an inferiority complex might feed into what Alexander Deeg describes as the Church’s dysfunctional fraternal relationship with Judaism, wherein the Church sees itself as Jacob (elected and favored) and the Synagogue as Esau (valued, but of marginal importance).

At the same time, the fact that many leaders within the Church began to use “Old Testament” around 40 years after Marcion could be a sign of the Church’s commitment to valuing these texts. Here the Church would be saying that the scriptures that Jews and

31 Irenaeus (c. 180 CE), Tertullian (c. 200 CE), and Origen (c. 220 CE) were among the first to use the appellation “Old Testament” (Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1988, 180-1).
Christians hold in common are testament. They are not merely (or accurately) Hebrew Bible. And, *Tanakh* requires more Hebrew knowledge than most Christians possess then or now. These books are better called testament—promise, sign, witness, covenant, testimony of God’s work of old that is consonant with God’s work and witness in the New Testament. Thus, the Church’s use of Old Testament as a response to the Marcionite controversy would say, though some have despised these texts, a faithful Christian response affirms that they shall be “exalted and lifted up” (Isaiah 52:13). Though some have rejected the Old Testament, a faithful Christian response confesses that such rejections are often linked in the Church’s history with the domination of Jewish people who have been “wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities” (Isa 53:5).34 Though some have argued that the Old Testament is acquainted with suffering and grief, a faithful Christian response understands that it “bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isa 53:12).

This constructive understanding of “Old Testament” that is committed to valuing these texts as sacred—and thus resisting Marcionite interpretations—lies behind my own use of the term here. I do not use this term simply because the Church has used it. Nor do I write “Old Testament” to make light of the oppressive and regressive ways in which the Church has used the term to marginalize and restrict the lives of minority groups, especially Jews. Rather, I want to explore and expound upon “Old Testament” as an anti-Marcionite tool that affirms, confesses, and (seeks to) understand these texts as testament. The Old Testament reveals God speaking. The Old Testament challenges traditional

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34 The word “for” carries here the sense “because of” or “as a result of.”
Christian theological anti-Semitism. The Old Testament helps unmask the racial contours of (especially) modern, Western, and Protestant readings of Hebrew scriptures. And, the Old Testament as testament—as witness—preaches.

In her sermon to the Academy of Homiletics in 2015, Rabbi Margaret Wenig preached from Isaiah 56 about her hope for and experience of Christian preaching of the Old Testament:

Jews, Christians and Muslims
have been in a lot of pain,
have caused one another a lot of pain
for centuries.

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35 For a discussion of some of the tenets of traditional Christian theological anti-Semitism see my analysis of concepts like promise/fulfillment, allegory, typology, and christo-telic readings in the next chapter.

36 Navigating conceptions of race as applied to scripture is thorny. For instance, Allen and Holbert’s work asserts that the Old Testament has significant concern for the nations, i.e. a universal interest. While some might debate this claim, my concern is that in the argument for “the universal interest of the Old Testament” we not strip the Hebrew Scriptures of their own ethnicity and culture. An example of this can be seen in Martin Brokenleg’s article about Native American preaching. He asserts: “Reading the old ways of the Jewish people is instructive for us Lakota, but it cannot become our way of life. We use the Hebrew Scriptures to gain additional insight into the nature of the one God with whom both Jewish and Lakota people have a long-term relationship. These understandings frequently come from having very similar experiences and stories. The Lakol Wicoh’an is the Lakota way of life and the basis of our hearing of Jesus and Jesus’ teachings” (“A Native American Perspective: 'That the People May Live' 26-42 in Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives Christine Smith, ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 34, emphasis added). Notice here how Brokenleg replaces the Old Testament with his own culture’s tradition. The Old Testament is the old Jewish way that is helpful—and in many ways similar to his own culture—but is decidedly not the basis for life or for understanding Jesus. I would like to suggest that this move has as much—if not more—to do with Brokenleg’s Western (Anglican) theological heritage than with Lakota tradition. Thus, his approach points to a broader issue in Western Christianity’s treatment of the Old Testament that we see in German Lutheran, British Anglican, and Anglo-American Methodist/Baptist traditions. See also treatments of the Old Testament from the antebellum South through the Civil Rights era in Albert J. Raboteau’s Slave Religion, Cleophus LaRue’s The Heart of Black Preaching, and Allan Callahan’s The Talking Book.
How can we
even imagine, along with Isaiah,
that one day
God’s house will be
or should be
“a house of prayer for all people”
where, rather than murdering one another,
all people could worship there in a multitude of languages
including silence and wordless song?
How can we imagine
that one day
God’s house could possibly be a house of prayer for all peoples?

Because
here at the Academy
I, for one, have felt,
at times,
that a house of prayer for all people
is already ours.37

1.3. The Servant Songs as Old Testament Preaching Guide

Following Wenig’s interpretation of Isaiah as a vision for constructive preaching
of the Old Testament, this dissertation turns to the proclamation of Second Isaiah,
specifically the Servant Songs, as a guide for preaching the Old Testament. In the New
Testament, Isaiah is the most frequently cited book,38 and many of its lines are etched in
Christian lyric imagination through Handel’s Messiah. Second Isaiah is also one of the

37 Margaret Wenig, “Everyone, Every Nation – Forever An Island?” Closing Service of
Worship during the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics, Dec. 5, 2015,
Nashville, TN.
38 Within Judaism, Isaiah is also a favored secondary reading to the Torah. William
Holliday notes that “more haftarot readings are taken from Isaiah than from any other
prophet” (William Holliday, Unbound by Time: Isaiah Still Speaks (Cambridge, MA:
Cowley, 2002), 141). Of the twenty passages drawn from Isaiah, “only four are from
Isaiah 1—39, the other sixteen being taken from chapters 40—66. That is to say, Jews
have manifested the same preference as Christians have for the good news of the last
twenty-seven chapters over the mixed message of the first thirty-nine” (Holliday 141).
models of prophetic preaching that Walter Brueggemann consistently points to as “the peculiar paradigm for a prophet of hope,” as witness to the Old Testament’s “core testimony,” and as the “supreme example of liberated poetic imagination in the Old Testament.” In fact, Brueggemann asserts that Jesus preaches “like 2 Isaiah,” and that the best contemporary examples of such preaching are found “in the liberated preaching of the black church” especially as exemplified in Martin Luther King, Jr.

Perhaps for this reason Dale Andrews calls for preachers to learn to preach like Second Isaiah. Andrews espouses a hearer-response model to proclamation that is based on reader-response criticism. What Andrews finds in Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah is a response to and re-reading of older scripture, including proto-Isaiah, in light of a changing context. Here Andrews notes “the role of the historical religious community in unfolding reinterpretations of prophetic traditions.” Thus Andrews presses preachers to follow his interpretation of the work within Second and Third Isaiah in order to engage in modern hearer-response criticism that presses beyond the idea that scripture is merely a source for extracting truth. Andrews’ hermeneutic seeks to reinterpret scripture. The goal is to respond to the scriptural text with consideration for the current time and place.

42 Ibid. 97.
43 Ibid. 97.
Andrews believes that, as Isaiah illustrates, this particular interaction of text and context framed by reinterpretation is what leads to fruitful action.⁴⁶

Within Second Isaiah, the Servant Songs exemplify what Brueggemann and Andrews advocate for Christian preaching. These Songs reinterpret texts from what I call an older testament⁴⁷ in light of exilic and post-exilic experiences. They hope, lament, teach, and advocate for action. These Songs proclaim a prophetic message within contexts of Babylonian and Persian domination. They wrestle with intra-Jewish theological debate about the nature of God and the role of Servant Israel.

The four Servant Songs are also marked by historical-criticism. Since Bernhard Duhm⁴⁸ helped distinguish and define these passages, many historical-critics have treated the Songs in ways that are both helpful and challenging to the work of interpreting these passages within Second Isaiah. Further, the Songs have traditionally been read as Christological source material, which has also both aided and challenged their interpretation. What gets lost amidst historical and christological disputes focused on the

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⁴⁶ Ibid. 127.
⁴⁷ “Older testament” is obviously a Christian, anachronistic term. Nevertheless, I use it here and throughout this dissertation as a way to highlight the witness of older scriptures that are then reinterpreted by Second Isaiah in light of the new experience of the Babylonian exile. Further, the use of “older testament” functions as a rhetorical/homiletical device to underscore that Christians are not the first who read and reinterpreted older scriptural texts in new contexts. Thus, the work of Second Isaiah in these Songs can be instructive for Christian preachers’ interpretation and proclamation of the Old Testament.
⁴⁸ Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1968 (orig. 1892)).
Servant’s identity in the Songs is the fact that in each Song the Servant figure\footnote{49} is used to highlight domination and to respond accordingly with what I will argue can be described as a homiletic turn. The Servant figure experiences systemic injustice, economic depression, cultural disgrace, and theological abuse. In response, Second Isaiah employs the Servant figure as one who delivers “The word not heard in the street” (Isa 42:2b), has “A mouth like a sharp sword” (Isa 49:2a), speaks with the “Tongue of a teacher” (Isa 50:4a), and becomes “The startler of many nations” (Isa 52:15a). These homiletic moments not only engage suffering and domination in ancient, exilic contexts. They speak to contexts of domination and suffering today. They also help uncover forces of domination within our own hermeneutics. As such the Servant Songs provide a model for exploring the preaching of the Old Testament.

\textbf{1.4. Guiding Approach}

This dissertation argues that Old Testament hermeneutics and homiletics are significantly affected by domination in its many forms (political, economic, cultural, theological). However, by using the Servant Songs as insight into the ways historically dominated people read and interpret the Old Testament one encounters different hermeneutic assumptions and alternative homiletics that deeply value and regularly employ these older testament texts. Reading and preaching with these voices demonstrate that the Old Testament is not a problem to be solved but a word to be proclaimed in the face of domination.

\footnote{49} Here I use “figure” to indicate a literary device that encompasses many different identities within Second Isaiah including—but not limited to—Israel, an individual, and a sub-community/group of people within Israel. 

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What is needed, then, is a deeper exploration of the undergirding theological and political factors affecting Old Testament homiletics. Chapter 2 begins this work by analyzing homiletical scholarship from the last several decades that has shaped the ways in which many preachers interpret and proclaim the Old Testament. Examining the work of Elizabeth Achtemeier, Walter Kaiser, Jr., John Holbert, Ellen Davis, Rein Bos, and Walter Brueggemann provides many helpful insights into best practices for preaching the Old Testament. At the same time, studying these scholars with an eye toward the impact of their methodologies on people in contexts of domination raises questions about the extent to which their methodologies, suggested themes, and proposed approaches do enough to undo past hermeneutical wrongs, unmask current domination at work through these texts, and lead preachers and congregations into a more just alternative.

This survey of homiletic scholarship sets the stage for an examination of the portrayals of the Suffering Servant in each of the four servant Songs (Chapter 3). The chapter highlights several key ways in which political, economic, theological, and cultural domination affected, and continues to affect, the preaching in and of the Old Testament. Through a close reading of each text, through reflection upon each Song as preaching, and through an examination of contemporary preaching of each Song, this chapter also proposes alternative approaches for preaching from the older testament.

Chapter 4 develops the insights of the previous chapter by reflecting on what Christians might learn from listening to Servant Israel. Here I examine the work of Alexander Deeg, a German, Christian homiletician seeking to undo centuries of domination by learning from Jewish hermeneutics and homiletics. His work invites
Christians to read and preach the Old Testament (as if) in the presence of Jews. This leads Deeg to propose different hermeneutic assumptions, alternative homiletic moves, and more regular engagement with the Old Testament.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus from that of proclaiming Old Testament texts in the presence of Servant Israel to the Old Testament preaching of African Americans, which is often shaped by the context of suffering and domination. Recent works of many leading African American homileticians and scholars show a long-standing and yet still developing Old Testament homiletic that frequently seeks to respond directly to a context of systemic injustice. Notably, many African American homiletic and hermeneutic approaches to the Old Testament are far less likely than European American approaches to neglect the Old Testament, lament its use, or theorize strategies for managing its difficulties. Rather, here the Old Testament is more likely to be preached along with the New as scripture through which God speaks to God’s people and challenges systems of domination.

The examples shown in Isaiah Servant Songs, in Jewish hermeneutics, and in African American preaching demonstrate that the problem of the Old Testament is not christological—whether one can make the text point to or ask for Christ. Neither is the problem the text’s violence, antiquity, or morality. Nor is the problem discerning the appropriate canonical balance or hermeneutical calculation. Rather, the problem of preaching the Old Testament is the problem of power and privilege. That is to say, those with power and privilege are often the ones who problematize the Old Testament. However, by attending to the Suffering Servant’s homiletic turn, to key aspects of Jewish
hermeneutics, and to African American homiletic exemplars, one discovers important correctives to older homiletic models and helpful insights for alternative approaches to preaching the Old Testament. These Songs preach, and they have much to teach us about preaching today.
2. Analysis of Old Testament Homiletics after the Shoah

In the decades following World War II, hundreds of books were written about how Christians should preach the Old Testament. This is in addition to lectionary resources and works dedicated to preaching a specific book, genre, or sub-section of the Old Testament. The proliferation of writing and reflecting on the Old Testament appears as a response to the problematic ways that the Old Testament was used, misused, and/or neglected in the years leading up to the Shoah. With an earnestness for (re)engaging the Old Testament, many scholars focused on solving Christians’ perceived problem with the Old Testament and with preaching Old Testament texts.¹ Some sought to identify and articulate Christ in Old Testament texts.² Many scholars focused on Old Testament narrative—sometimes as an alternative to challenging legal and poetic materials, sometimes as a test case for the inductive method.³ Others promoted expositional


readings of the Old Testament, often to increase Christian knowledge of these texts, though sometimes as a more detailed way of articulating Christ. Still other scholars promoted a theological, inter-textual reading that views the Old Testament as promissory source. And, a few scholars have called for a reengaging an active sense of the prophetic office of the Old Testament.

Not all of these approaches are of equal homiletic value, and not all can be covered here. Thus, what follows is not an exhaustive review of all the literature written about preaching the Old Testament since the 1940’s. Rather, this study focuses upon key scholars from the last several decades who have shaped the way the Old Testament is perceived and preached. Specifically, I examine Elizabeth Achtemeier, Walter Kaiser, Jr., John Holbert, Ellen Davis, Rein Bos, and Walter Brueggemann.

2.1. Elizabeth Achtemeier
Since the early 1960’s Elizabeth Achtemeier has had a significant impact on the interpretation and proclamation of the Old Testament. As a woman who studied and later taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1973—1996, Achtemeier

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Stories (Eugene, Cascade, 2013); Dave Bland, Reclaiming the Imagination: The Exodus as Paradigmatic Narrative for Preaching (St. Louis: Chalice, 2009).
4 See, for example, Graeme Goldsworthy, Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Haddon Robinson, Models for Biblical Preaching: Expository Sermons form the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014); Paul Watson, Expository Preaching from the Old Testament (Parkersburg, WV: Ohio Valley College, 1987).
worked in an theological milieu of liberation theology while also having to navigate
gender discrimination and liberation in the theological academy. Achtemeier’s approach
to the Old Testament is also informed by her post graduate work in Heidelberg, Germany,
which has become a noted center of Jewish Studies, and in Basel, Switzerland, which is
the institution where Karl Barth taught after the Nazi party forced him out of Germany.
A leading scholar and preacher in the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), Achtemeier served
on the denomination's Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity—a group that
helps congregations navigate, among other things, “issues of Christology, biblical
authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power.”

As a biblical scholar, Achtemeier not only wrote numerous books on the Old
Testament, she penned several works on preaching the Old Testament or parts of it.

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7 “Elizabeth Achtemeier, noted Bible professor, dies after illness,” The Layman: A
Ministry of the Presbyterian Lay Committee, October 28, 2002, accessed February 24,
8 Ibid.
9 “Peace, Unity, Purity: Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the
Church,” Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, accessed February 24,
report-revised-english.pdf.
10 See: Achtemeier, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); The
    Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66: A Theological Commentary (Minneapolis:
    Augsburg, 1982); Nahum-Malachi (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986); Jeremiah (Atlanta : John
    Knox Press, 1987); and Minor Prophets I (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996). Note, this
    list is not comprehensive.
11 See: Achtemeier, “The Exodus and the Gospel in the Old Testament,” Theology and
    Christian Preaching,” in A light unto my path: Old Testament studies in honor of Jacob M
    Myers, eds. H. N. Bream, R. D. Heim and C. A. Moore (Philadelphia: Temple Univ Pr,
    1974) 3-24; “Preaching from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel,” Biblical Preaching: An
    “Preaching from the Psalms,” Review & Expositor 81 no 3 (Sum 1984): 437-449;
    “Plumbing the Riches: Deuteronomy for the Preacher,” Interpretation 41 no 3 (Jul 1987):
    269-281; “Isaiah of Jerusalem: Themes and Preaching Possibilities,” Reading and
Achtemeier also was a longtime editor of a preaching resource for pastors, and she was a contributor to many homiletic conversations. The quantity and influence of Achtemeier’s work, then, makes her an essential scholar to examine as part of our analysis of Old Testament homiletics.

In *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel*, Achtemeier laments the neglect of the Old Testament in mainstream, American Christianity. After analyzing

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Achtemeier served as editor for the *Proclamation* series published in the 1970’s and 1980’s (Philadelphia: Fortress Press). She was also a contributor to *Lectionary Homiletics* in the 1990’s.


the causes of this neglect. Achtemeier turns toward the exploration of positive assessments and constructive proposals for the Old Testament. She begins by highlighting some of the unique theological contributions of the Old Testament, including creation theology, image-of-God theology, and a focus on communal faith and practice. She also offers a chapter describing how she understands the theological perspectives of the numerous voices within the hexateuch, monarchical traditions, and classical prophets.

Religion,’ which is so characteristic of American faith and practice, and yet which has so little connection with the Biblical faith” (34).

Achtemeier offers an intriguing tale of the loss of the Old Testament in Protestantism that traces this loss all the way back to the Reformation itself! She argues that at that time the Bible was used largely to support dogmatic/doctrinal claims of the Reformation—in this way the Bible became mostly a proof text divorced form its contexts (22). Later Enlightenment rationalism challenged dogmatic readings, emphasized the human and particular nature of each text, and challenged conceptions of the text as divine word (24). Later development of philosophy and history of religion arguments (such as that of Wilhelm Vatke) argued that the Old Testament showed a development of thought from primitive worship, to ethical consciousness, and to external, ceremonial religion (26). Julius Wellhausen is perhaps best known for this approach (28), the effect of which was the “total devaluation of [the Old Testament’s] worth in the church” (30). As Achtemeier describes it, after Wellhausen the Old Testament was “considered to be simply the history of the first stages in man’s spiritual evolution, whose lower ideas of God and faith had subsequently been superseded by the higher spiritual truths of Christianity. The Old Testament had no revelatory value in itself. It was simply the historical preparation for the New Testament, and although one had to know something of the Old Testament background to understand the New Testament…the examination of this background was of importance only to the scholar” (30). Achtemeier argues that as a result of understanding the Old Testament through the lens of history of religion, there were no studies of Old Testament belief in Germany for 25 years after 1896 (Hermann Schultz) and no full-length Old Testament theology developed in the US between 1904 (Andrew Bruce Davidson) and 1940 (30). The Old Testament “fell into almost total disuse and obscurity within the ongoing life of the church, and it has to this day never been recovered in the mainstream of American Protestantism” (33).

The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel 38, 39, and 43, respectively. See “IV. The Nature of the Old Testament.”
However, her most significant argument comes in chapter V with her analysis of the relation between the two testaments. Here she is keen to steer her readers away from what she calls “developmentalism”—the idea that the Bible develops from primitive, superstition to sophisticated, spiritual understanding.\(^\text{18}\) She wants us to be more aware of the interpretative nuances that necessarily occur when a people of faith turn to scripture to make sense of their current experiences. Achtemeier’s primary assertion here is that the production and engagement of scripture is on-going:

> The promises of Yahweh, in the Old Testament’s view, are fulfilled, taken away, added on to, reshaped, preserved, so that the impression left by the proclamation is one of constant interaction between Israel and a vital word of God, an interaction marked by all the details and zigzags of an ongoing and actual history. Nothing is neat here, nothing is finally formulated. Every word involves a movement forward and a constantly reassessed understanding…The result of this ‘dialogue’ between Israel and an ever-new word of God is that the past words of Yahweh are constantly recalled and given new interpretations, not arbitrarily but in terms of Israel’s new encounters with her Lord.\(^\text{19}\)

Notice the homiletical language. Achtemeier speaks of the Old Testament as “proclamation.” It develops as the result of “constant interaction between Israel and a vital word of God.” She describes the character of the Old Testament as a “‘dialogue’ between Israel and an ever-new word of God.” Achtemeier’s implication here is that the Old Testament took the shape that we recognize, not as the result of the historical development of religion, nor by way of a linear theological progression, but from the on-going, creative process of wrestling with the available scriptural texts in light of Israel’s context and experience at a particular time. Another way to say this would be: the Old Testament took its shape as the result of preaching.

\(^{\text{18}}\) *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* 80.

\(^{\text{19}}\) Ibid. 78.
For Achtemeier, preaching is, perhaps, the best analogy for understanding the imaginative hermeneutics and constructive theological production that occurs within the Old Testament. As Achtemeier explains, in the Old Testament “older” texts get incorporated into messages for “later” contexts. This wedding of text and context “reshapes the understanding of the older, which in turn exerts a new influence on subsequent traditions.” However, later preaching does not merely affect the understanding of older texts. It reshapes them. Achtemeier’s case in point is the way J, P, and D, edit and append new material to the older texts in order to bear witness to the presence of Yahweh as a result of newly “confessed” realities. While we may quibble with the exact nuances of the correlation between contemporary preaching and proclamation within the Old Testament, Achtemeier’s point here is that “Because Yahweh is constantly on the move in the history of Israel, the Old Testament’s witness [another preaching word!] to him constantly undergoes movement, constantly remains open toward the future that Yahweh shapes.”

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20 Achtemeier’s sustained analogy between preaching and the imaginative hermeneutics and constructive theological production that occurs in the Old Testament will provide an important building block in my own argument that Second Isaiah can help shape a constructive Old Testament hermeneutic. While I develop this argument in chapter 3, here I simply examine the ways Achtemeier develops this analogy in her own writing.

21 The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel 79.

22 Ibid. 79.

23 For instance, preachers today do not rewrite scripture in the same way that we see in the Old Testament. However, even with a more guarded understanding of canon, contemporary preachers can argue with or ignore texts in a way that effectively edits them for the hearer. Preachers do propose language more fitting for contemporary contexts, and sometimes this affects scriptural translation (e.g. “brothers” to “brothers and sisters”). And, as fundamentalist preaching shows (to name just one example) contemporary preaching can change scripture’s genre, thus impacting the way that scripture imparts meaning.

24 The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel 81.
It is a pity that Achtemeier did not develop these thoughts further. The idea that the Old Testament is shaped by preaching might have led to an Old Testament theology similar to the testimony—countertestimony theology that Walter Brueggemann would write 25 years later.²⁵ Or, perhaps Achtemeier’s observations might have helped foster a homiletic akin to that of Anna Carter Florence’s *Preaching as Testimony*.²⁶ Even more intriguing would be an exploration of the idea that preachers are ontologically related to the Old Testament. Of course, differences remain between the two. Nevertheless, could this construct help alleviate the real and perceived distance between the Old Testament and contemporary Christian preaching? How might it affect proclamation when Old Testament texts are seen not merely as historical documents or theological treasure troves but as homiletic co-laborers? Achtemeier largely leaves such questions unexplored.

Instead, her interest in the Old Testament as on-going proclamation seems to have more to do with New Testament connections than with an appreciation of the Old Testament itself. Shortly after commending the Old Testament as a work of preaching, Achtemeier moves to portray this same nature in a pejorative light:

The entire witness of the Old Testament strains forward toward God’s future, carrying forward God’s ancient promises and judgements in a variety of changing testimonies. And the Old Testament ends without answering the question of whether or not God proved true, of whether or not he brought his words to completion in the history of his chosen people. The question about the fulfillment of the Old Testament is therefore nothing less than the question about God’s faithfulness to his word, and finally the question of whether or not Yahweh of Israel is God.²⁷

²⁷ *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* 82.
What, just a moment ago, was a constructive work of theology is now, for Achtemeier, a “strain.” What once was the faithful adaptation of scripture to contemporary experience is now a failing to show “God proved true.” And, what had been a dialogue between Israel and an ever-new word of God is now a glaring question mark about “whether or not Yahweh of Israel is God.”

All of this comes about, not because Achtemeier has suddenly reassessed the Old Testament in light of new evidence, but because she wants to carve out a distinctive position for the New Testament. As Achtemeier sees it, New Testament writers engage in the same essential hermeneutic and homiletic acts as their predecessors. As in the Old, writers in the New reflect upon and offer proclamation from previous scriptural texts in light of what God is doing in the present. The difference, for Achtemeier, lies in the character of New Testament proclamation. It does not remain open and on-going. Rather, Achtemeier argues that the scriptural homiletic project finds its terminus and ultimate telos in New Testament proclamation:

as was the case with the working of the word in the Old Testament, the inbreaking of a new action of God in the new word in Jesus Christ does not abrogate the old. Rather, the new gathers up the old and brings it to completion and thereby gives the old a new interpretation. The final meaning of the promises and words of the Old Testament finds their final goal and interpretation in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (emphasis added).

The claim that the New Testament is the final completion of the Old Testament obviously offers a clear articulation of the place that Jesus holds in Christian scripture and Christian

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28 Ibid. 112.
29 Ibid. 115.
theology. God’s promises are fulfilled and God’s identity as true God is solidified in Jesus.

However, by portraying the New Testament as final completion, Achtemeier also implicitly suggests that there are significant problems inherent to the Old Testament. Her language marginalizes the witness of ancient Israel and modern Judaism as less important than New Testament witness. Further, despite earlier claims about Israel as a creative and vital community of faith, and despite her argument against developmentalism, Achtemeier presents the Old Testament community as little more than a shadow of better things to come in the New Testament. This leads Achtemeier to claim that Israel’s life in the Old Testament is analogous to life in the church, and that the church “becomes the new Israel in Christ.” Notice, she does not say that through Christ the Church participates in God’s covenant with Israel. There is a replacement theology implicit in Achtemeier’s position that makes the Old Testament community relevant mostly as a point of historical reference and all modern Jewish communities theologically untenable. In this way the Old Testament functions as a problem (to be solved in the New Testament) and as a tool for Christian problematizing of modern Judaism.

Achtemeier’s portrayal of the New Testament as final completion also changes the nature of proclamation. If the New Testament is both final and complete, then preaching is no longer about wrestling with older scriptural texts in light of God’s present action in the world—the very thing she seemed to appreciate about the Old Testament! While Achtemeier still asserts that preachers must be able to articulate past preachers’

30 Ibid. 148.
wrestlings with scripture, especially those of New Testament writers, she does not—and her position cannot—allow the preacher to continue to wrestle with scriptural promises in light of present experience. God’s promises and identity are complete and final. Thus Achtemeier has to conceive of preaching as little more than repetition. The goal is to “preach Jesus Christ as the New Testament writers knew and understood him.” The understanding of preaching takes away its constructive, responsive, creative punch.

Lastly and not surprisingly, Achtemeier’s portrayal of the New Testament as final completion presents the Old Testament as something of secondary importance. It provides background for understanding the New Testament’s language and theology. It offers promises that are acknowledged and fulfilled in the New Testament. It gives a frame of reference for better understanding the ministry of Jesus and the life of the Church. In short, as Achtemeier says elsewhere, “the Old Testament stands incomplete without Him, Who is its perfection.”

The value of the Old Testament seems to be the driving question for Achtemeier’s later work, Preaching from the Old Testament. Here Achtemeier asks why the Old Testament is necessary for the Church. Her answer proposes four theses: (1) “apart from the Old Testament, it is almost impossible to understand the nature of the world;”

31 Ibid. 113. Another key difference, which Achtemeier ignores, is that the New Testament writers were mostly Jews who were participating in the continuing re-interpretation of and dialogue about scripture. Can a 21st century gentile preacher engage this dialogue in the same way? Achtemeier’s new quote indicates that the answer that she expects is NO.


“apart from the Old Testament, it is almost impossible properly to understand ourselves as human beings;”34 (3) “apart from the Old Testament, we also cannot properly understand who God is;”35 and (4) “We cannot appropriate the New Testament view of the world and of human beings and of God unless we absorb those views first of all from the Old Testament.”36 In each of the four theses the Old Testament gains importance largely as aide to one’s “understanding,” particularly one’s understanding of human and divine life. This approach directly affects her homiletic.

While Achtemeier notes that scripture “does not merely convey information,”37 her survey of narrative, law, prophets, psalms, and wisdom literature indicates that what is most needed is a proper understanding of the information. So, the key to preaching the major narratives in Genesis through 2 Kings is to catch that Genesis 1—11 offers a narrative approach to preaching “doctrine”!,38 that Genesis 12—50 offers a foretaste of the fulfillment of promise,39 that Exodus—Joshua “educates” the congregation about “its nature and function as the people of God,”40 and that Deuteronomy—2 Kings focuses on the question: “How can the people of God be in the world but not of it?.”41 So too, preaching from Old Testament law requires a preacher to “first understand it theologically.”42 Similarly, one’s “understanding of the prophetic office and message

34 Ibid. 22, emphasis added.
35 Ibid. 22, emphasis added.
36 Ibid. 23.
37 Ibid. 27.
38 Ibid. 72.
39 Ibid. 74.
40 Ibid. 76.
41 Ibid. 82.
42 Ibid. 94, emphasis added.
influences the way we preach…it is necessary that we know what a prophet does before we can discuss how to preach from the Old Testament prophetic writings.”

And, though the psalms “speak the language of great literature,” the “purpose” of preaching from the Psalter is to “instruct a congregation in the life of faith.”

We might object here that this description is insufficient for great literature, much less for the words of scripture. Achtemeier, however, is undeterred. She concludes by cautioning, “We cannot understand Wisdom texts in terms of our contemporary views of reality.”

What all these examples show is just how salient, how pressing, the issue of the preacher’s ignorance is to Achtemeier’s assessment of the challenge of proclaiming the Old Testament. It is as if she believes that the preacher need only to grow in understanding to be able to proclaim the Old Testament more frequently and more faithfully. Of course, this is not to say that preachers would not benefit from more study of the Old Testament. Neither is this to ignore the reductive sense of “understanding” that Achtemeier presents in her book. (It is something more akin to knowledge than wisdom.)

Still, Achtemeier’s determined focus on “understanding” prevents her from addressing some of the larger—and deeper—issues related to preaching the Old Testament. In fact, Achtemeier’s work perpetuates some of these troubling issues.

Notice, Achtemeier asserts that the Old Testament is almost necessary. She writes that word twice in her four theses on why the Old Testament is important for the church’s understanding.

43 Ibid. 109, emphasis added.
44 Ibid. 137-8, emphasis added.
45 Ibid. 165, emphasis added.
“it is almost impossible to understand the nature of the world;”\textsuperscript{46}
“it is almost impossible properly to understand ourselves as human beings;”\textsuperscript{47}

The implication here is that while the preacher might well benefit from the Old Testament, she or he does not necessarily need it. Such a troubling notion is fueled by the theological assertions proffered first in \textit{The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel} and now developed in \textit{Preaching from the Old Testament}.

In her chapter on sermon preparation, Achtemeier presents a salvation-history model of scripture that is rooted in the idea of “one story.”\textsuperscript{48} Developing the story-metaphor, Achtemeier holds that the Old Testament needs the New like an introduction needs a conclusion. Thus, she asserts, “it is insufficient to have only an Old Testament text” for preaching, and, more alarmingly, “apart from the New Testament, the Old Testament does not belong to the Christian church and is not its book.”\textsuperscript{49} This assertion seems to ignore the early Church’s use of the Old Testament as scripture \textit{sans} New Testament! See 2 Timothy 3:16.

Furthermore, some of the implications that Achtemeier draws from her story-metaphor are illogical.\textsuperscript{50} Most notably, she writes, “Apart from the completion in the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. 21, \textit{emphasis added}.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. 22, \textit{emphasis added}.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Preaching from the Old Testament} 32. It is striking that she does not choose to unite the Testaments with the notion that the primary actor is the one God.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid. 56.
\textsuperscript{50} For instance, Achtemeier asserts, “Our Lord serves as the final reinterpretation of a sacred history that is interpreted, and reinterpreted, and reinterpreted again throughout the Bible’s story” (\textit{Preaching from the Old Testament} 57). Such an assertion overlooks the fact that gospels, themselves, interpret to us Jesus’s interpretation of God’s work in the world. Beyond that, Paul, Peter, James, John and the author of Hebrews offer to us reinterpretations of Jesus’s life and teachings. Thus, even in the New Testament, Jesus’s interpretation is not the final interpretation.
New Testament, we never know what happened to God’s word. Did [God] keep [God’s] promises to judge and to save, or are those vows still left unfulfilled? Only by pairing the texts can we hear the whole story.“As51 But, we might ask: is there no fulfillment in the Old Testament? Or, conversely, can two texts (an Old Testament reading and a New Testament one) tell the “whole story” of the fulfillment of God’s word? If not, then why not focus on one moment or one word? More to the point, we might ask whether the New Testament really demonstrates that God has fulfilled God’s word to judge and save. The gospels present Jesus as a fulfillment of some of the scriptures. However, the entire fulfillment of scripture is delayed until the second coming. The New Testament ends with Revelation’s vision of future judgment and salvation. The kingdom of God has indeed come near in Jesus, but this reign has not yet fully arrived. In other words, not even the New Testament tells the “whole story.”

However, Achtemeier’s approach is not merely flawed in a few places or illogical at points. The effect of her promise-fulfillment construal of scripture is truly troubling. This can be seen most readily in her homiletical reflections on the Suffering Servant (Isa 52:13-53:12). In a preaching resource from 2001, Achtemeier notes that the prophet Isaiah understands the people of Israel as the servant. Isaiah’s proclamation is that Israel suffered exile and suffers dire conditions upon return as a result of their sin.52 “But God used even this punishment for a greater purpose.”53 As Isaiah preaches, even the nations

51 Preaching from the Old Testament 57.
53 Ibid. 116.
recognize that the servant was “wounded for our transgressions” (53:5). Israel then, suffers for the sake of the world.\textsuperscript{54}

While some scholars may quibble with Achtemeier’s interpretation thus far, it is not entirely implausible nor particularly troubling. The problem comes when she treats Isaiah’s preaching as a promise that needs to be fulfilled finally and completely in Jesus. Here Isaiah, on its own, is portrayed as an incomplete text—or a text that says more than the original author understands. This leads Achtemeier to propagate several assertions that make for troubling preaching:

The figure of the Suffering Servant here in our text is intended as a picture of Israel as God wanted her to be, Israel as the instrument for the future salvation of the world...if Israel would fulfill that role, God promised, she would in the end ‘be exalted and lifted up’ and ‘very high’ (52:13).

We know only one historical figure who fulfills all that imagery, however—our Lord Jesus Christ....Indeed, throughout the New Testament, our Lord takes over the role of Israel and becomes what Israel was supposed to be in the purpose of God. Israel was the adopted son of God, according to the prophets. Christ is the only begotten Son of God. Israel was the disobedient son in the garden and in the desert; Jesus is the obedient one, resisting all temptations and praying, ‘Not my will but thine be done.’ Israel’s King David was a murderer and adulterer; Jesus was the wholly righteous davidic heir. Israel’s priests corrupted their office; our high priest was without sinning. God took all that Israel was supposed to be and concentrated it in the one figure of his incarnate Son. And so too, he showed us in the flesh the true Suffering Servant.\textsuperscript{55}

Despite Achtemeier’s intention to value the Old Testament, her interpretation and use of it present it as a flawed text from a failed people. Achtemeier preaches: Israel had a chance to be what God wanted them to be; Israel could have been exalted and lifted up; but, Israel did not fulfill the role and promise God offered to them. Instead, Israel was (merely) “adopted;” they were “disobedient,” their best leader was a “murderer and

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 116.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. 116-7.
adulterer,” and their spiritual leaders “corrupted their office.” These are words that drip with traditional theological anti-semitism. Surely they need to be rejected along with the hermeneutic that produced them.

This analysis of Achtemeier’s work on preaching the Old Testament demonstrates that it is insufficient, though not incorrect, to assert that Christian preaching of the Old Testament suffers from a lack of understanding of the text, context, or thematic content. Clearly Christian difficulties with the Old Testament run deeper than what can be cured with information. Indeed, Achtemeier’s development of her promise-fulfillment hermeneutic of scripture and her homiletic execution of that with regard to the Suffering Servant show that traditional Christian hermeneutics are themselves an obstacle to understanding the Old Testament and a potential vehicle for the domination of others.

2.2. Walter Kaiser, Jr.

Much like Elizabeth Achtemeier, Walter Kaiser, Jr., is an evangelical who has been writing for decades about interpreting and preaching the Old Testament. Kaiser identifies as a German Baptist (now North American Baptist).

He explains his initial interest in the Old Testament as arising from a conflict with his high school biology teacher, who debunked the creation account of Genesis. Kaiser sought to prove him wrong. He carried this passion forward, studying Bible at a leading evangelical institution, Wheaton College, and completing graduate studies in “Old Testament and

57 Ibid. As the website explains, Kaiser “was first sparked by a high school biology class in which the Genesis account was kindly, but firmly, debunked. When Kaiser dared to voice another opinion, he was challenged to do a report that would convince his teacher otherwise. Undaunted, Kaiser prepared a forty-page paper complete with anthropological drawings and bibliography.”
ancient history” at Brandeis University, an institution whose values “are rooted in Jewish history and experience.” Kaiser taught at Wheaton College and Trinity Evangelical School before becoming the Colman M. Mockler distinguished Professor of Old Testament and former President of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hampton, MA.

His work in biblical studies is widespread in scope. He examines texts like Psalms 120—34, the Minor Prophets, Lamentations, Exodus, and Leviticus. Additionally, Kaiser has penned works on Old Testament theology, trying to locate the “center” or Mitte of the Old Testament. His homiletic work focuses mostly upon expository preaching and on issues related to preaching the Old Testament.

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58 Ibid.
68 See Walter Kaiser, Jr., *The Majesty of God in the Old Testament: A Guide for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); *Preaching and Teaching the Last*
Given his correlative hermeneutic and homiletic career, perhaps it is not surprising that Kaiser seeks to distinguish himself from Achtemeier. Kaiser criticizes Achtemeier’s approach from two different angles. Hermeneutically, Kaiser is not pleased that Achtemeier disagrees with John Bright who asserted that “the text has but one meaning, the meaning intended by its author; and there is but one method for discovering its true meaning, the grammatical-historical method.” 69 About Bright’s thesis Kaiser opines, “This is true, of course.” 70 Homiletically, Kaiser disagrees with Achtemeier’s assertion that “no sermon can become the Word of God for the Christian church if it deals only with the Old Testament apart from the New.” 71 Here Kaiser is frustrated that Achtemeier’s perspective seems to hold sway within his tradition. Kaiser asserts, “the sad fact is that many in evangelical circles use a method of preaching on the Old Testament that is very similar to this view. The result is that they get very close to, if they do not indeed practice, what we know as eisegesis.” 72

By contrast, Kaiser seeks to elevate a form of expository preaching that—at least on one level—tries to take seriously the Old Testament text and its various perspectives. First, he notes that the Old Testament offers important and distinctive contributions to the

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70 *Preaching and Teaching* from *The Old Testament* 10, emphasis added. For critique of the Kaiser/Bright thesis see below.


72 Ibid. 11-2.
life of faith. Here Kaiser highlights four main areas: doctrine, ethics, practical living, and preaching. He claims, “Without the input of the Old Testament in each of these four areas, the church will find itself bankrupt in the twenty-first century.” With regard to doctrine, Kaiser focuses especially upon Old Testament perspectives on creation, the Fall, the Law, the greatness of God, the nature of substitutionary atonement (via scapegoat), the new heavens and new earth, and the second coming. Unfortunately, Kaiser posits these Old Testament-shaped doctrines mostly as suggestions to begin a potential list. He does not develop here any of the points of doctrine, which might have helped him illustrate the Old Testament’s unique theological contribution. He also does not seek here to expand the list of what he calls the uniquely Old Testament doctrines. Perhaps more troubling, Kaiser does not acknowledge that he frames these Old Testament doctrines from a Christian theological perspective that might undercut the “uniqueness” of the Old Testament that he seeks to elevate.

Kaiser does offer some potentially intriguing analysis of the ethical and practical contributions of the Old Testament. He especially appreciates how it “deals with the questions of life,” “human dignity,” “treatment of the environment,” and “the nature and purpose of marital love.” While these are, no doubt, important ethical topics, they are framed too broadly here if the goal is to model an appreciation of the text—or even to highlight distinctive contributions of the Old Testament.

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73 Ibid. 40. In an earlier work, Kaiser asserts a similar assessment, highlighting the doctrine of creation, the image of God, the Fall, the decalogue, and the idea of God with us (Ex 29:45-6) Walter Kaiser, Jr., The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1973) 28-9.

74 Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 40.

75 Ibid. 23.
Kaiser’s second—and more central—claim is that preachers need to pay attention to the actual words of the Old Testament. “We first must establish what the text of the Old Testament is asserting.” To this end, Kaiser argues that the Old Testament should be interpreted by attending to the original author(s), to their historical context, and to their engagement with the genre expectations of their time. “The place we must begin is with the plain, natural, original, historical meaning of the passage.”

The assumption here is that the Old Testament can and does speak a compelling word to present day readers.

Kaiser is keen here to argue against reading backwards from Christ. “The tendency to interpret the Bible backward is a serious procedural problem, for it will leave a large vacuum in our teachings and provide seedbeds for tomorrow’s heresies. It is reductionistic to level out the Bible to say only what the New Testament has said!”

Perhaps Kaiser is again arguing to distinguish himself from Achtemeier’s position. Either way, it seems clear that Kaiser wants interpreters and preachers to recognize that the texts of the Old Testament have their own voices and perspectives that demand our attention.

As Kaiser punctuates the point: “On the question of where meaning is to be lodged…we answer that it is in the text as it is found in the context of the writer’s assertions.”

76 Ibid. 12.
77 Per Kaiser: start with the “human author’s use of words in the context of his life and times, literary genres, and theological givens” (Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 51).
78 Ibid. 51.
79 “Even though the Old Testament is historically dated, still it was intended for the general and universal profit of all who read it” (The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching 25).
80 Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 28.
81 Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 11, emphasis added.
Kaiser then couples this hermeneutic with an expository homiletic that seems to highlight the text.\textsuperscript{82} As he explains, expository preaching takes a paragraph or pericope of scripture and “allows the biblical text to supply both the shape and the content of the message”\textsuperscript{83} Though he uses the word “shape,” Kaiser does not necessarily mean genre. As his sample sermons illustrate, the “shape” that an expository sermon takes is the progression from verse to verse. In other words, Kaiser does not preach poetic texts poetically, or legal texts didactically, or narrative texts inductively, etc. Still, Kaiser seems to maintain an interest in the message and form of the text. He counsels preachers to begin their sermon preparation by asking what the author means, how the text engages genre to make meaning, and what key words need to be parsed and examined in a lexicon or theological dictionary.\textsuperscript{84} After this initial work, Kaiser recommends that preachers get a good handle on the context in which the passage is located, find the “focal point/pivotal point” in the passage, discern a homiletical key word from the passage, and explore contemporary connections by asking who-what-when-where-why and how.\textsuperscript{85}

Given the lengths to which Kaiser goes to explain his understanding of homiletical exegesis, it is curious that he does not follow these assertions through to their logical conclusions. Consider his claim that the text has only one meaning. Many might

\textsuperscript{82} “It is all too easy to fall into the trap of pouring what we already know of the grace of God into the different containers made up of different verses of Scripture without seriously giving each text an opportunity to first teach us what it wants to say. Not only does such preaching become repetitive, but it severely handicaps the preacher’s opportunity to grow and stretch into new areas” (\textit{Preaching and Teaching} from \textit{The Old Testament} 50).
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Preaching and Teaching} from \textit{The Old Testament} 49.
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Preaching and Teaching} from \textit{The Old Testament} 52.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Preaching and Teaching} from \textit{The Old Testament} 54-56.
(rightly) debate such an assertion and question whether such a claim recognizes the scriptural author’s freedom, takes seriously the multivalent nature of language, accounts for obscure and difficult to translate passages, and acknowledges scripture’s own use and reinterpretation of earlier scripture (just to name a few possible objections). Still, Kaiser’s initial call to understand meaning is a move to analyze a scriptural author’s intent through textual, historical, and literary study. Far fewer scholars would debate the value of this approach as an important part of homiletical exegesis. Except, apparently, Kaiser himself takes issue with it. He often eschews his own method!

Kaiser’s approach to Isaiah helps to bear out this point. While in rare occasions he can stick to the shape and content of a biblical text, more often Kaiser ignores the most obvious referents of the text in order to superimpose tenets from Christian theology. Thus, from Isaiah 42:1-7 Kaiser speaks of the servant as one who will bring “salvation” and who has a special relationship with “the Father,” but the Isaianic text does not use this language. At the same time Kaiser makes no mention of the word “justice,” even though it appears three times in the first four verses of chapter 42. This approach to

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86 In a sample sermon on Isaiah 40:12-31, Kaiser preaches with the scriptural text, using its language and identification of God to announce good news. He highlights the greatness of our “Lord” and “God” (sans reference to Jesus), highlighting this point by engaging the subject matter of every 2-3 verse-unit (Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament 114-118). In another example, Kaiser examines Isaiah 40–66 as a prophetic call for Israel to be engaged in centrifugal mission to the nations; He does this by attending to the details of the text and does not engage overtly Christian or supercessionist thought (Walter Kaiser, Jr., Mission in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012) 51-64).

87 “The prophet introduces us to the special relationship that this ‘servant of the Lord’ has with the Father: he is ‘my servant’ (Isa 42:1a), a designation that marks his willingness to carry out the Father’s will…” (Walter Kaiser, Jr., The Messiah in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 174, emphasis added).
justice is common in Kaiser’s writing. In the second servant song, Isaiah 49:1-6, Kaiser seems to acknowledge that the servant is Israel (49:3), but then Kaiser turns the servant against his own people in ways that do not correspond with the basic sense of the text. Of the third servant song, Isaiah 50:4-9, Kaiser continues to divorce the servant from Israel. He asserts, “Instead of stubbornly closing his ears to what he is being taught, as the nation of Israel has done, his ears are open (v5a). He has not been a rebellious learner or a stubborn pupil.” Here again, Kaiser does not read with the text. The text does not mention Israel at all—much less does it refer to them as rebellious or stubborn.

Furthermore, Isaiah 50:4-9 says that God opened the servant’s ears—there is no human agency here, just as God seems to be the active force calling for the closing of Israel’s ears earlier in Isaiah 6:9-10. Finally, in commenting on the fourth servant song, Kaiser’s true agenda becomes apparent: “It is clear that God’s servant is often the nation of Israel…But it is just as certain that the servant is an individual who has a mission to

88 For instance, after a substantial examination of preaching the prophets, Kaiser notes in the last paragraph, “We could have considered the social justice aspect as well, but it’s there for the careful reader to see” (The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching 114). In that same lecture, Kaiser negatively compares campus protestors of the 1970’s with biblical prophets. Apparently referring to anti-war, racial justice, and women’s liberation advocates, Kaiser says “The prophets were men of God’s Word, a vast difference from man’s word” (93). While the prophets said, thus saith the Lord, Kaiser asserts that these advocates say, “I say…I feel…I think…” (93). Kaiser even argues that prophets “did not appeal to the crowds…They appealed basically to the individual…They did not appeal to the institution. They did not appeal to society in general. The longed for something to happen inside of the individual person. Then perhaps, the institutions and society might be affected” (93-4).

89 Kaiser says that the servant “will labor as their head, their representative, and their ultimate realization of everything that the nation can ever become.” Then he adds, “The Servant, however, realizes that in many ways he has labored in vain for Israel (v4)” (The Messiah in the Old Testament 176).

90 The Messiah in the Old Testament 177.
Israel and the nations. When all these passages are put together, that person turns out to be the Messiah.”^91 While the term “messiah” is used in Isaiah, it appears infrequently. In fact, this Hebrew word does not appear in any of the servant songs, and in Isaiah 45:1 it is used explicitly to refer to Cyrus. These details do not seem to affect Kaiser’s interpretation. Of Isaiah 52:13—53:12, Kaiser writes: “Undoubtedly, this is the summit of Old Testament prophetic literature. Few passages can rival it for clarity on the suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah.”^92 Not surprisingly, Kaiser “exposits” these verses by superimposing (eisegeting?) Jesus’ passion narrative upon Isaiah 52 and 53^93 to a somewhat menacing effect.^94

What this brief examination of Kaiser’s understanding of the Isaianic servant texts shows is that his claim of one meaning for the text is not based on an interest in biblical criticism. Rather, as he states clearly and frequently, Kaiser is interested in proclaiming the “central theme” of Jesus: “If we have not seen the central theme of the Old Testament, indeed, all the things concerning Jesus, then we are also ‘fools and slow of heart’ to believe the Old Testament.”^95 Again, Kaiser asserts, “Let it be affirmed right away that the central theme of both the Old and New Testaments is Christ.”^96 This christologically driven reading dominates and ultimately decides every interpretative

^91 Ibid. 173.
^92 Ibid. 178.
^93 “But God’s Servant, his Messiah, will come out of this Gesthemane experience approved by God and triumphant in God’s plan” (The Messiah in the Old Testament 178).
^94 Kaiser includes a warning for those in ancient Israel and apparently within modern Judaism who might reject Jesus as messiah: “They should fear what will happen to them on that final day of judgment” (The Messiah in the Old Testament 177).
^95 Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 27.
^96 Ibid. 41.
question for Kaiser. Not only does this hermeneutic result in the changing or ignoring of the details of a text, it dramatically redefines authorial intent to be little more than wrestling with messianic promise. So, Kaiser claims, the prophets grappled with what they could know of Christ. And, the Torah, historical books, and wisdom literature struggle to understand the promise in Genesis 12:3. Indeed, this promise runs from Abraham through David to all of Israel, but is only fulfilled in Christ.

Nevertheless, Kaiser argues for seeing Old Testament as “a progressive march of revelation…This march not only accumulates newer and fuller revelatory data, but it has an epigenetic unity which relates the first truth of the Old Testament and the last truth of the New, even as a seed is related to a full grown tree.” Notice here that Kaiser seems to imply that the Old Testament is problematic in that it is under-developed. The Old Testament contains little more than a seed of truth. Still, Kaiser also argues that the Old Testament is not exactly the promise to the New Testament’s fulfillment (contra Achteneier). For Kaiser, promise (continually redefined and imagined) and fulfillment

97 “Indeed, while the prophets were ignorant of the time and circumstances surrounding the coming of the Messiah (1 Pet. 1:10-12), they were clear about five things: (1) the were writing about the Messiah; (2) they knew Messiah would suffer; (3) they knew Messiah would also be glorified and that he would triumph; (4) they knew the suffering would precede the glory; and (5) they knew that they were speaking not only to their own generation but to all of us who would come later, such as those in the church in Peter’s day” (Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 41).
98 Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 32.
99 Ibid. 32-3. Kaiser later cites Sidney Greidanus favorably: “our purpose in preaching from the Old Testament is not to preach Christ to the exclusion of the ‘whole counsel of God.’ Instead, he insists, the preacher’s task is ‘to view the whole counsel of God, with all its teachings, laws, prophecies, and visions, in the light of Jesus Christ’” (Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 51, citing Sidney Greidanus, Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999) 227-8).
100 The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching 11-2.
(of a lesser and incomplete sort) appear throughout the Old Testament. Kaiser proposes that we “understand the two testaments as part of one, continuing, unified plan of God.”

However, what gets lost in the process of highlighting this plan are the actual words, perspectives, genres, interests, fears, and concerns of the Old Testament authors themselves. While Kaiser presents the Christ-promise plan as “the forest” that we must understand before “attempting to exegete the individual trees, branches, or leaves,” he hardly seems to be able to recognize the trees from the forest that he constructs. In fact, for someone who has written several works on preaching the Old Testament, Kaiser seems shockingly obsessed with including New Testament expressions. Though he argues against reading backwards, Kaiser regularly evaluates the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. In both The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching and in Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament, Kaiser cites New Testament texts and perspectives more frequently than those of the Old Testament! He discourages the use of Old Testament names like Israel, Moses, and David in the sermon outline as a sign of a “B.C. sermon” that is irrelevant to contemporary concerns. Here Kaiser’s problem with the Old Testament seems to be that the language, figures, and context of the Old Testament are not the same as those in the New.

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101 Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 37.
102 Ibid. 34.
103 “When the names of Israel, Moses, Isaiah, or David are found in a sermon outline, they reveal that we are preaching a B.C. sermon and not a twenty-first century message” (Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 57).
Perhaps most alarmingly, Kaiser presents the Old Testament in a pejorative light. He refers to the Old Testament not only as a seed of truth (as we saw above), but as “a simple picture story with big print.”¹⁰⁴ He presents the priestly sacrificial system as efficacious (for a time) but far less easy, effective, and elegant than Christ’s atonement.¹⁰⁵ He even repeats the old comparison of the Law to “the slave who took the boy to school to be sure that he got there on time.”¹⁰⁶ This action, he says is the “purpose and the goal of the Old Testament.”¹⁰⁷ In this way Kaiser diminishes the Old Testament and anyone who would study it.

Thus despite Kaiser’s promising beginning that focused upon valuing the Old Testament’s unique theological and ethical contributions and advocated for discerning the author’s intention and meaning in historical context, Kaiser’s approach must be rejected. It eschews its own reasoning. And, despite calls for expository preaching, Kaiser theologically and functionally diminishes the Old Testament itself. Kaiser identifies the problem of the Old Testament as being a simple and legalistic seed of truth that cannot be used profitably without a significant New Testament reframing. Further, if the answer to, “What did the Old Testament author mean,” is consistently and ultimately something about the “promise of Christ” then heuristics like close readings in original languages,

¹⁰⁴ “Many people cannot understand what their Lord did for them on the cross. Modern man cannot understand. But it is here in the Old Testament that they can begin to see it. It is a simple picture story with big print. Read it in Leviticus 16…Here is an evangelistic message antedating the Christian era” (The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching 29).
¹⁰⁵ Preaching and Teaching from The Old Testament 68.
¹⁰⁶ The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching 26, emphasis added. This analogy is based on exposition of Gal 3:24, which says the law is “our pedagogue.”.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 26.
lexicographical study, literary analysis, and historical-critical examination in general become little more than elaborate ruses with latent potential for the domination and/or erasure of those who do not share the interpreter’s agenda. And, this is even more alarming when “justice” is not recognized as a central component of Old Testament (especially prophetic) literature. Still, I do not believe that Kaiser intends such a ruse. It seems to me that he truly believes that the historically located meaning of every Old Testament author is a message about the promise of Christ. Nevertheless, hermeneutics like Kaiser’s should be treated as those that mostly pretend to listen to and value the people and perspectives of the Old Testament. As such, these hermeneutics must be rejected.

2.3. John Holbert

John Holbert offers a significantly different perspective on preaching the Old Testament than either Kaiser or Achtemeier. Affiliated with the United Methodist Church, Holbert was the editor for the Psalms and Canticles material of the 1989 United Methodist Hymnal. He got his PhD in Hebrew Bible in the mid 1970’s, only a few years after Fred Craddock’s book, As One Without Authority, shifted the white, mainline homiletical focus from deductive sermons to narrative, inductive forms of preaching. This shift became a significant focal point for Holbert’s homiletical work on the Old Testament. Perhaps because of this focus, Holbert does not repeat some of the traditional Christian tropes (i.e. promise-fulfillment) that complicate Achtemeier’s work. Nor is Holbert concerned to defend the Old Testament from scientific challenges or non-

christological readings. In this way he avoids many of the problematic elements of Kaiser’s approach. Instead, Holbert wants to show that the narratives of the Old Testament are powerful and important for Christian preaching.

While he does not write exclusively on the Old Testament, Holbert is a homiletician who has penned books on preaching creation, the ten commandments, and Job in addition to writing other articles on the Old Testament and the three books on preaching the Old Testament, which will be reviewed below. Holbert is the leading figure who reflects upon applying the inductive/narrative approach to preaching Old Testament texts.


Specifically, in *Preaching the Old Testament*, Holbert reviews previous works on preaching the Old Testament and then observes, “there is a need for more direction in *how* to preach from the Hebrew Bible.”¹¹⁵ He proposes a narrative approach. In one sense, Holbert wants to connect narrative preaching to literary-critical analysis of scripture.¹¹⁶ Mostly, however, Holbert seeks to do what Fred Craddock did not do in *As One Without Authority*. Namely, Holbert applies Craddock’s narrative/inductive preaching style to the Old Testament. Reviewing his own work, Holbert assesses: “I affirmed with Fred Craddock, that preaching is an attempt to affirm God’s way in the world by aligning one’s preaching with the ‘mode and matter’ of that way…In biblical narrative, the form (mode) is inextricably connected to the content (matter).”¹¹⁷ Thus, Holbert offers an important corrective to Craddock’s earlier neglect of the Old Testament in narrative preaching. Still, like Craddock, Holbert’s approach here frequently opens itself to the long-standing critique of inductive preaching; namely, that it focuses on form at the expense of content. As an example, one might critique Holbert in that his attention to applying narrative to Old Testament preaching barely engages the Exodus narrative—*the narrative* that many would highlight as the narrative and theological central of the Old Testament.

Perhaps it is with an eye to content that Holbert joins with Ron Allen only a few years later to publish *Holy Root, Holy Branches*. This book broaches the content of the

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¹¹⁶ Holbert writes, “narrative homiletics is important if we are to take seriously significant portions of the biblical tradition and their powerful communication and reception in our congregations” (Ibid. 35).
¹¹⁷ Ibid. 76.
Old Testament, by looking at several key themes and issues within the testament (though, notably, it does not address prophetic usage of “root” and “branch”!). The book briefly surveys the Church’s treatment of the Old Testament (ch. 1) and suggests ways Christians today might connect the “first” and the “second” testaments, as the authors refer to them (ch. 6). Allen and Holbert critique the law and gospel model, concluding: “The first thirty-nine books of the Protestant Bible are thus every bit as much gospel as the last twenty-seven.” Further, the authors call out the binary of a Jewish external approach to religion versus the Christian internal approach as something that is “simply a false reductionism.” So too Allen and Holbert reject the portrait of an ethnic versus universal dichotomy: “the Hebrew Bible is not characterized by a narrow ethnicity.” Finally, after reviewing the church’s history of reading the Old Testament though allegory, typology, and promise-fulfillment models, Allen and Holbert assert, “the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ are the same God.”

Despite this promising frame that unmasks and wrestles with ways that Christian hermeneutics have misread the Old Testament and dominated Jewish peoples, Allen and Holbert direct the body of their work to the less-than-inspiring details of Old Testament frameworks for interpretation. They propose that preachers be mindful of four paradigms of the Old Testament: (1) the deuteronomic—election is based in God’s love; (2) the priestly—humans are called to be holy, like God; (3) the wisdom paradigm—God creates

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119 Ibid. 21.
120 Ibid. 22.
121 Ibid. 29.
order and purpose in the world; and (4) the apocalyptic—God offers radical hope that critiques human institutions.\textsuperscript{122} They next highlight four fundamental \textit{themes} that “cut across the various paradigms” and connect with the New Testament: creation, \textit{hesed}, deliverance, and justice.\textsuperscript{123} In a third chapter Holbert and Allen discuss “vexing theological and moral \textit{issues}.”\textsuperscript{124} These include “material that appears to be antiquarian” such as circumcision, dietary laws, temple, blood sacrifice,\textsuperscript{125} “material that is theologically inappropriate, unintelligible, or immoral,”\textsuperscript{126} and material that depicts “brutal treatment of Human Beings (or others) without censure.”\textsuperscript{127} With these paradigms, themes, and issues in hand, Hobert and Allen argue that the preacher is well equipped to “make the best sense of the text that they can in light of the fullest knowledge of God that they have.”\textsuperscript{128} In this way Allen and Holbert present a prescriptive model for preaching the Old Testament wherein sermons are to be read through the four paradigms and four themes (and avoiding the three issues).

Setting aside questions such as whether “deuteronomic, priestly, wisdom, and apocalyptic” accurately capture the fullness of the Old Testament, the issue with Allen and Holbert’s model is that, at least implicitly, it treats the Old Testament as little more than a set of theological and ethical points. These points can be culled out of the scriptures—harvested like a timeless kernel from the husk of tradition—universally

\begin{enumerate}
\item[Ib. 57-8.]
\item[Ibid. 85.]
\item[Ibid. 11, emphasis added.]
\item[Ibid. 108.]
\item[Ibid. 121.]
\item[Ibid. 123.]
\item[Ibid. 131.]
\end{enumerate}
applied to the New Testament and even extended to the contemporary Church. The issue with this prescriptive model is that such an approach effectively minimizes the primary narratives (e.g. exodus, exile, and return) and the main character (i.e. the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) of the very scripture that the authors seek to value. Such a move turns the Old Testament into a set of propositions that fail to adequately portray the God who encounters us. To illustrate this point we might ask whether the New Testament, or a contemporary denomination, or even one’s own family could be portrayed faithfully with four paradigms, four themes, and three issues. Such an effort is rightly seen as absurdly reductive! Holbert and Allen ultimately treat the particularity of the Old Testament (and even its specific details) as a problem to be managed with a theological/thematic lens that only looks on the macro level. Thus, despite some initial theological promise, Holbert and Allen’s model must be rejected as ineffective and obfuscating.

Nearly two decades after his collaboration with Allen, Holbert returns to the subject of preaching the Old Testament. In *Telling the Whole Story*, Holbert examines a nuanced approach to narrative preaching that seeks to avoid or overcome many of the issues of previous iterations. For instance, Holbert is clear from the beginning that not every text is narrative, nor is the narrative/inductive sermon form something that should always be applied. Holbert also responds directly to what he labels as Richard

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129 Of course, there are New Testament scholars who engage in this kind of thematic reductionism. While such works can hold some heuristic value, they do so only by obscuring significant amounts of complex data.

Lischer’s critiques of narrative preaching. Holbert even uses Lischer as a measure of the depth and effectiveness of his sample sermons. Still, Holbert largely sees Lischer’s critique as that which is aimed at the poor practice of narrative preaching rather than at narrative preaching itself. As Holbert argues, “despite the important analysis that Lischer offers, story preaching can still find a significant role in our preaching.”

This significant role seems to lie in the function of Old (and New) Testament narratives as textual invitation and as potential initiation into a different way of seeing God and the world. As Holbert explains:

So, this book is an attempt to offer preachers a way for them to enter the strange world of the Bible and to help them to present to their hearers the transformational power of that world in such a way that their listeners may hear the power and thereby have an opportunity to hear the unique voice of God…I have chosen merely a slice of it to examine. That slice is the Hebrew Bible’s narratives (emphasis added).

Here Holbert helpfully highlights Old Testament narrative as a tool for encountering the strange, transformative, presence of God. Generally speaking, narratives can help a reader to see the world differently, to develop empathy, and to sense something of another’s perspective on the world. Scriptural narratives, Holbert argues, further offer preachers a place to encounter the voice and perspective of God.

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131 Here Holbert refers to Lischer’s critiques of narrative styles of preaching as too focused on aesthetics and ontology while lacking significant theological and socio-political engagement. See Richard Lischer, “The Limits of Story,” Interpretation, 38 no 1 (Jan 1984): 26-38. While Holbert values Lischer’s criticisms, he argues that “each critique comes down to the misuse of stories rather than a generalized claim that stories have no place in sermons at all. Each problem he names has appeared, and continues to appear, in pulpits in many churches” (Telling the Whole Story 24).
132 Ibid. 24.
133 Ibid. ix-x.
Recognizing the power of this claim, Holbert is careful to steer his readers away from authoritarian readings that seek to dominate others. He argues that Biblical stories are not propaganda and should not be used as such.\textsuperscript{134} Rather, scriptural narratives are “rich and complex, the source of ongoing reflection and proclamation. And because that is so, the sermons that arise from them can take several focuses and still be faithful witnesses to the story itself. The trick is in the telling.”\textsuperscript{135}

While Holbert is right to press against univocal, authoritarian readings of scripture, he unfortunately focuses too much attention on the “trick” of storytelling and not enough on the “strange,” “transformational” presence of God. Here, again, Holbert seems to see the particularity of the Old Testament as a problem to be managed or ignored. For instance, when Holbert begins to discuss proclaiming the Old Testament, he focuses on the differences between ancient and modern storytelling, arguing, “it could be said that the largest single obstacle standing in the way of effective Bible reading today is this difference in their style and modern style.”\textsuperscript{136} While it is important—and challenging—work to interpret the Bible, I would argue “the largest single obstacle” to effective interpretation has less to do with style and more to do with our own blindness and resistance to the unique, transforming voice of God at work in and through the

\textsuperscript{134} Specifically, Holbert notes that no Old Testament story is univocal (\textit{Telling the Whole Story} 9). This assessment is, perhaps, also designed to mitigate concerns that others have expressed about inductive preaching holding the potential to not only persuade but manipulate the hearer.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid. 9.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid. 25, emphasis added.
biblical text. The “strange world of the Bible” cannot be reduced to matters of literary craft.

And yet, Holbert continues to allow his readers to infer from his writings such a reduction to style. In describing how the Bible aides the preacher in proclamation, Holbert argues, “The greatest gift that the Bible itself provides to the would-be storyteller is that of its wonderful stories that, when read well, offer central clues toward their effective telling.” While many have rightly highlighted the tremendous gift that biblical stories are in the life of the church, identifying a literary feature as the greatest gift risks elevating a form of writing and speaking over even the revelation of God in scripture. Of course, Holbert argues that narrative facilitates encounter with God’s presence, but his framework here for celebrating narrative implies that even with scriptural narratives, form is more important than revealed content.

This preference continues throughout his work. Holbert offers insights into plot, character and characterization, physical description, the inner lives of characters, and point of view. He also describes different storytelling approaches: pure story, frame

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137 Holbert asserts that “the Bible is at the same time literature, and thereby subject to the laws of literary reading, and the Word of God. No preacher can or would desire to separate those two realities” (Telling the Whole Story 27). I agree with this assessment of scripture, but note that in discussing the challenge of style and in several other places, Holbert seems to separate the two realities, focusing primarily on the literary.
138 I suspect Holbert is more interested here in making the case for the necessity of close, exegetical readings. As he writes later: “extensive and careful exegesis is the key to serious preaching. This is doubly true if your sermonic goal is a story sermon....The first rule of story preaching is: let the story itself be your guide” (Telling the Whole Story 40).
139 Ibid. 25, emphasis added.
140 Ibid. 28-40.
141 Holberts defines this as “an unembellished story.” “The teller’s imagination is fully engaged in the preparation of a pure story sermon as details revealed in the reading are
story,\textsuperscript{142} multiple story,\textsuperscript{143} fictional story,\textsuperscript{144} threaded story,\textsuperscript{145} and personal story.\textsuperscript{146} These are all nicely described and illustrated with sample sermons, but what seems to get lost is the potential development of the idea that Old Testament narratives give the preacher a window into God’s presence that seeks to encounter and transform the world. To be clear, Holbert offers the reader nice examples of exegesis and preaching of texts from Genesis, Jonah, 1 Samuel, and Judges. However, his homiletic reflection focuses far more on the mundane details of what the sermon does narratively and stylistically than on how a narrative initiates an encounter with the unique voice and presence of God. For example, in evaluating his sermon on Jonah, Holbert writes five sentences about the theology in the sermon. Four of the five sentences discuss the nature of story and conceptualization. The one remaining sentence observes simply that the sermon did not engage in “meaningless repetition of general theological truths.”\textsuperscript{147} This lost opportunity for theological reflection on a sermon on Jonah’s narrative is largely repeated in the theological evaluation of the other three sermons.

\textsuperscript{142} A frame story means using another story to “focus the [biblical] story so as to help listeners listen to the story with a particular goal for that story in mind” (Ibid. 41).

\textsuperscript{143} The multiple story sermon is “like the frame story…except that in this style the frame is always another biblical story” (Ibid. 42).

\textsuperscript{144} In fictional story, “the preacher writes a fictional story in response to a close reading of a biblical story. The decision is made to do this, because the preacher determines that the ancient story as it is presented does not speak as clearly or as forcefully as a more modern story might” (Ibid. 43).

\textsuperscript{145} A threaded story is where “the preacher chooses to tell the story both by telling and commenting on the story at the same time” (Ibid. 44).

\textsuperscript{146} With a personal story “the preacher relates a personal experience that is fully illuminative of the biblical witness” (Ibid. 44).

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid. 130. The paragraph evaluating theology in Jonah is on 130-131.
While one might say that Holbert is constrained in his reflections by the need to respond to Lischer’s critiques; another might rightly observe that it is precisely because of Lischer’s critiques (among others) that theological reflection is all the more important for Holbert’s work. Yet Holbert does not deliver this kind of reflection. Perhaps the most promising theological lead comes in the conclusion to the book where Holbert observes: “It is no accident that the African-American church, along with Jewish synagogues, have year after year found their lives in the story of the Exodus from Egypt.” Unfortunately this lead comes too late in the book to be developed. Perhaps because of this space constraint, Holbert omits any reference to African American theological reflection and concludes by retelling a rabbinic story and quoting Elie Wiesel who wrote that humans are created because God loves stories.149

Despite these critiques it is important to state again that Holbert has made significant contributions toward the development of Christian preaching of the Old Testament. He identifies and fills a glaring lacuna (the Old Testament!) in Fred Craddock’s work on inductive preaching in As One Without Authority. Holbert further proffers that Old Testament narratives might be especially well suited to invite and initiate hearers into God’s strange and transformative ways in the world. Finally, he models homiletically that the Old Testament—or at least significant portions of it—is a vital word that speaks to the church today. Thus, in several significant ways Holbert helps

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148 Ibid. 199. In the first chapter on the history of narrative preaching Holbert includes a paragraph about the role of story in African American preaching (14). Though he cites Henry Mitchell, Holbert does little more here than note that Black preaching has used narratives (14).
149 Ibid. 200.
to propel the Christian preaching of the Old Testament—even though narrative does not cover or accomplish everything (as Holbert notes) nor does a focus on form satisfy the church’s theological needs (as Lischer and this critique notes).\footnote{Paul Scott Wilson models some of what it might look like to engage in theological reflection with regard to the use of sermon form. In this way can be seen as a response to Holbert. In his short study, Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching, Wilson reflects, not on narrative/inductive preaching per se, but on his four pages of a sermon—which though presented as a heuristic is often received as a prescriptive sermonic form. Here Wilson explores approaches for preaching simply trouble and grace from the Old Testament. For instance, to address Old Testament passages where there seems to be no grace, Wilson suggests that the preacher use textual inversion tactics such as deconstructing the text’s assumptions and attitudes; or, one might employ a textual extension tactic by continuing to read the Old Testament text beyond the pericope (Wilson, Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 13). Our goal, says Wilson, is not simply to preach the text but to announce the gospel “located in relationship to the primary text preached, wherever that is found and irrespective of whatever echoes we may choose to sound from elsewhere in the Bible” (13, emphasis added). What Wilson highlights here is a model that seeks to value the text and highlight the role of God in the text rather than simply jumping to a thematic element or to the New Testament for good news.

A second significant issue that Wilson addresses is how to preach Old Testament narratives. Here, Wilson can be read as a direct response to Holbert. Wilson encourages the preacher to use his or her theological imagination as invited by the gaps of the narrative (c.f. Eric Auerbach), as grounded in the details of the text/context, and as centered on what God is doing in or behind the text (22). In this way, Wilson’s narrative-model seeks to hold together “form” and “content”—what Holbert calls “mode” and “matter.”

Unlike Holbert, however, Wilson’s model is not bound to the inductive approach (though perhaps to the 4-page approach). Instead, Wilson seeks to bind himself and the preacher to observing and articulating the role of God in the text. Thus, the key to faithful narrative preaching does not lie in attention to content or to generic form; rather, the key lies in an awareness of the Spirit throughout the process of interpretation and proclamation (24). Furthermore, Wilson holds that the aim of this proclamation is the “magnification of God.” By this phrase he means both celebrating God and highlighting/enlarging the role of God in the text and in life (32).

These gestures toward a theological approach to preaching the Old Testament—and in Wilson’s short work they can be little more than gestures—point to a more fruitful prescriptive model for engaging scripture. The preacher may not always preach trouble and grace, nor does preaching the Old Testament necessarily entail a narrative approach (Wilson reflects briefly on the Psalter too), but every preacher of scripture should seek to develop a theological imagination that is guided by the text and shaped by the Spirit.
2.4. Ellen Davis

Though Ellen Davis is best known as an Old Testament scholar, she has written several works that offer important contributions toward preaching the Old Testament. Specifically, Davis draws upon her professional training as a biblical scholar and her religious affiliation as an Anglican to argue for particular textual, poetic, and liturgical approaches to reading and preaching the text. While these approaches can be observed throughout her work, Davis features a different one of the three approaches in her books on preaching the Old Testament.

In *Imagination Shaped*, Davis explores preaching the Old Testament from an Anglican/liturgical perspective. Primarily, this entails reflecting on preaching through the sermons of five noted Anglican preachers from the 16th and 19th centuries. By citing these examples, Davis seeks to move Anglican traditions (and other liberal protestant traditions) away from preaching that focuses upon calling “reasonable people to right

These very basic assertions are often precisely what gets neglected in homiletic works focusing explicitly on the Old Testament and on preaching with a narrative form.


153 As Davis concludes: “As I stated at the outset, the stimulus for this book is a problem: namely, that there is little serious wrestling with the biblical message in mainline churches. In my judgment, that lack is due chiefly to a neglected and atrophied Christian
thinking about the virtuous life” and toward preaching that lifts up “God’s goodness” and the Bible as “something other and vastly more than a moral treatise.”

As an alternative to theologically flat and aesthetically boring moralism, Davis proposes that we reflect more on preaching the Old Testament within the liturgical context. To this end, Davis observes that the sermons she selected participate in and are shaped by the liturgy, including the language of Book of Common Prayer (BCP). For instance, Davis sees Lancelot Andrewes calling his congregation to confession (corporate and individual) as a way to avoid anti-semitism and acknowledge the agency of their own sin in the crucifixion of Christ. John Donne’s preaching highlights the “affective dimension of the drama of salvation.” Joseph Hall’s preaching leads his hearers into divine meditation and to discernment of God’s telos for their lives. Frederick Robertson, though interested in psychological approaches to preaching, does not “reduce Christian doctrines or genuine experience of God to purely psychological phenomena,” but instead points to the witness of scripture and—through his suggestive, interrogative style—invites his hearers to experience the invitation and encouragement of God. Henry Parry Liddon’s “genius lay in using the language of the Bible to identify plainly

imaginations, to which the language of the Bible is largely unintelligible” (Imagination Shaped 249).

154 Davis, Imagination Shaped 4-5.
155 Ibid. 5.
156 Ibid. 44-5.
157 Ibid. 75.
159 Ibid. 158.
the moral and spiritual dimensions of the problems his listeners faced.”¹⁶⁰ Each of these preachers, argues Davis, demonstrates an “imagination shaped by tradition.”¹⁶¹

Davis focuses her attention especially on the scriptural and poetic nature of language in the Anglican tradition. Of course, she is not wrong on this account—especially when considering the witness of the BCP. As the prayer book can shape preaching, so the Anglican sermons that Davis features can inform a homiletic:

From them we may begin to learn how to ‘speak scripture,’ the language not only of the biblical writers but also of the ancient and medieval commentators and theologians, as well as the poets who through centuries composed the prayers and hymns of the liturgy. They initiate us into the art of Christian conversation, the long and deep conversation about what God is ‘like.’¹⁶²

According to Davis this conversation about preaching entails a commitment to scriptural language.¹⁶³ Like Henry Parry Liddon, preachers should assume “nothing but the intrinsic interest of the text for inquiring minds.”¹⁶⁴ Preachers should point to God’s mercy in scripture and in life.¹⁶⁵ They should read the text suggestively, dwelling on historical form,¹⁶⁶ and allowing the Bible to be the “primary source and check point” of preaching.¹⁶⁷ And this homiletic conversation should include more than Christian

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 201.
¹⁶¹ Ibid. 7.
¹⁶² Ibid. 266.
¹⁶³ As Davis asserts, “I suggest only that the tradition at its best encourages a certain kind of holistic, concrete, and practical thinking, marked by (1) a deep reverence for God and also for the material world as God’s creation; (2) a feeling for the ‘ordered loveliness’ of language—both these characteristics being fostered by study of Scripture and absorption of the liturgy; and (3) a broad understanding of human nature (itself derived in no small part from the Bible)” (Imagination Shaped 7).
¹⁶⁴ Davis, Imagination Shaped 214.
¹⁶⁵ As does John Donne. Davis, Imagination Shaped 65.
¹⁶⁶ So Frederick Robertson. Davis, Imagination Shaped 170.
¹⁶⁷ So Frederick Robertson. Davis, Imagination Shaped 158.
conversation partners. Davis argues that preachers should follow Lancelot Andrewes, who regularly consulted “rabbinic sources and often cites them with approval.”\footnote{168 Following Lancelot Andrewes’ practice. Davis, \textit{Imagination Shaped} 44.}

At the same time, Davis calls preachers to remember that scripture and the Book of Common Prayer speak poetically. Unfortunately, in \textit{Imagination Shaped}, this aspect is the least developed, though she will return to it later in \textit{Wondrous Depth}. Here Davis points to the use of word play,\footnote{169 Ibid. 127.} extended metaphor,\footnote{170 Ibid. 79.} aphorism,\footnote{171 Ibid. 128.} analogy,\footnote{172 Ibid. 217.} and an open-ended conclusion.\footnote{173 Ibid. 171. Here Davis commends the practice of Frederick Robertson, who would end his sermons with a question, charge, or a non-obvious statement that challenges and encourages the audience.} For further guidance, Davis suggests that the kind of preaching that she samples here is connected to the New Homiletic.\footnote{174 I.e. the narrative/inductive homiletic popularized by Grady Davis, Fred Craddock, Henry Mitchell Joseph Sittler, Charles Rice, Eugene Lowry and other homileticians in the mid to late twentieth century. Ibid. 265.} She also points to the work of homiletician, Joseph Sittler.\footnote{175 Ibid. 265.}

However, Davis does not engage critically with either claim—and perhaps for good reason. Such connections are clearly anachronistic, and it is not readily apparent why the forms highlighted in the sermons would connect more naturally with the New Homiletic than with well-established patterns of Greek rhetoric. Perhaps Davis has a way of understanding 16th and 19th century preaching as a sort of porto-form of the New Homiletic. Yet, this approach is not developed. And, even if it were to be developed, a further complication arises. The rhetorical approaches of the New Homiletic are often at
odds with the neo-Barthian, scriptural-linguistic approach that Davis favors here and in her other works.

Instead of engaging theory and clarifying her homiletic, Davis focuses on empirical observations about exemplary Anglican preachers. This approach does a fine job introducing five figures who might be neglected otherwise. However, beyond a few hermeneutic “to do’s” and some rhetorical tools, Davis’ sample sermons and observations do not provide enough guidance to form a liturgical/poetic homiletic. Perhaps this is not Davis’ goal. Nevertheless, her work here invites us to long for more. One might ask how Davis would examine the interaction between the liturgical calendar, the Eucharist, the prayers, and preaching. Or, in what specific ways might Old Testament preaching change if our language is to be sourced, checked, and shaped imaginatively by scripture? Or, finally, what are the theological and rhetorical parameters for preachers who seek to follow Davis’ call to a “poetic obligation…to dwell on words, and thus to mediate between past and future”?\textsuperscript{176}

Davis pursues this last question further in \textit{Wondrous Depth}. Here again Davis seeks to move Old Testament preaching beyond the mere communication of ethics and information. She defines her purpose as demonstrating that “biblical interpretation and preaching are essentially related to one another…[as forms of] art.”\textsuperscript{177} Davis highlights the artfulness of close, exegetical interpretative work, and her example, \textit{par excellence}, is preaching from the Psalter. Exploring the interconnection between scriptural language

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid. 267.
and poetics, Davis opines, “the poets who composed [the psalms] thought differently about God than we ordinarily do, and more deeply.”\textsuperscript{178} This different content requires a different approach. The psalms make demands on the preacher: “It is not possible to preach the psalms deeply and well unless you are also praying them regularly.”\textsuperscript{179} The psalms also make demands on the congregation. The use of first person “engages us directly in offering a prayer or a cry or a song to God;” they draw us “out of ourselves and into the Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{180}

One of the gifts of \textit{Wondrous Depth} is that in it Davis recognizes and demonstrates that scripture—and particularly the Old Testament as scripture—is not an object to be observed coolly. Rather, “the text is an urgent and speaking presence.”\textsuperscript{181} The poetic and spiritual voice of the Psalms makes claims on the reader/hearer. This poetic nature opens up new, imaginative possibilities for faithful living. Here, as before, Davis attempts to show these imaginative possibilities by use of sermonic examples. John Donne’s preaching appears again. Davis includes a long, annotated sermon from him on Psalm 63. Lancelot Andrews is also here with a Good Friday sermon on Lamentations 1:12. And, Davis even includes some of her own, much more contemporary, sermons as examples.

As in \textit{Imagination Shaped}, these examples present somewhat helpful illustrations and implications. Thankfully, Davis devotes more time in \textit{Wondrous Depth} to reflection

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid. 26.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid. 20.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid. 18-19.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid. xiv.
on preaching as poetry.\textsuperscript{182} She claims, first, that the poetry we encounter in the Psalter is able to “instruct our feelings without negating them.”\textsuperscript{183} Poetic preaching, then, engages the emotions without overpowering them. Furthermore, learning to preach poetically involves attention to the oral/aural nature of the text, reading it “over and over aloud, until you can see how and why one line yields to the next, until its images are haunting your imagination, until its phraseology and its particular pattern of repetition-with-variation (for that is the basic pattern of Israelite poetry) become distinctive in your mind.”\textsuperscript{184} This practice should draw out an abundance of meaning from the text, its phrases, and even its individual words.\textsuperscript{185} Here Davis pushes against those, like Walter

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\textsuperscript{182} Here, again, however, one wishes that Davis would have engaged in more sustained reflection on interpretative methodology—especially since her stated purpose is a methodological one: to connect exegesis and preaching. At times, the lack of attention to methodology seems to affect Davis’s own work. For instance, she asserts, “The best poems persuade us to think and act differently” (24, \textit{emphasis added}). I cannot imagine that Davis would make this claim again if she had reflected on it more. As she knows, it is grossly reductive to claim that the function of poetry is to persuade. Furthermore, one of Davis’ colleagues, Richard Lischer, has famously critiqued the focus on persuasion in preaching. He writes, “I don’t reject persuasion as a paradigm for preaching because I disapprove of it for being rationalistic, exclusivist, coercive, or manipulative, though it can be and has been all these things. It's simply inadequate—like explaining Jackson Pollock by a discussion of paint. A rhetorical paradigm cannot do justice to the richness of our theological calling” (Richard Lischer, “Why I am not Persuasive,” \textit{Homiletic} 24 no. 2 (Wint 1999) 13-16, 15). Indeed, the best poetry opens up new possibilities; it uncovers deep realities; or it frames the world in surprising ways. For instance, in \textit{Finally Comes the Poet}, Walter Brueggemann defines poetic speech as “the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age” (Walter Brueggeman, \textit{Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 3). Both of these works from Davis’ peers and colleagues would have significantly helped her to develop a stronger and fuller homiletical method that could offer more guidance for the kind of preaching she wishes to encourage.
\textsuperscript{183} Davis, \textit{Wondrous Depth} 21.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid. 24.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid. 63.
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Kaiser, Jr., who would say that the text has one meaning. Here too Davis notes that critical biblical study is but a set of tools for the kind of interpretative artistry needed in the church.\textsuperscript{186} Of course such work has standards,\textsuperscript{187} and should be guided by the witness of the scriptural canon and Christian theology,\textsuperscript{188} but Davis’ emphasis here is on the artistry of scriptural preaching.

Perhaps nowhere is this more clear than in her discussion of Lancelot Andrewes, who appears here as the exemplar of poetic, scriptural preaching. Davis claims that Andrewes’ sermons are like good poetry: “What linger in the mind are a few words, indelibly impressed, and a sharp visual image conveyed by one line (and sometimes only a couple words) of Scripture—although always that single image is shown to have multiple facets.”\textsuperscript{189} At the same time, Andrewes preaches with a colloquial, everyday language that is informed by scripture, the liturgy, and patristic theologians—what Clayton Schmit calls the “uncommon use of common language.”\textsuperscript{190} It is the kind of language that one encounters especially in the eucharistic liturgy—everyday words and

\textsuperscript{186} “And so my proposal is that preaching would benefit from critical biblical studies that reflect a more inclusive view of a text’s history, a view that takes into account not only its supposed original meaning but also the abundance of meaning that has been found in the text through the centuries by Jews and Christians” (Davis, \textit{Wondrous Depth} 65).
\textsuperscript{187} Davis argues for the standards of precision, functionality, imagination, and beauty (Davis, \textit{Wondrous Depth} 68). In a later work Davis adds that safeguards for ethical interpretation include preaching across the entire canon, the use of historical criticism, study of church tradition of interpretation, and reflection on the liturgy (Davis, \textit{Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016) 101).
\textsuperscript{188} To this end see also the “Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture” pgs 1-5 in \textit{The Art of Reading Scripture}. Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
\textsuperscript{189} Davis, \textit{Wondrous Depth} 93.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid. 100, citing Clayton Schmit, \textit{Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 72.
scriptures that “orient people toward mystery, to lead them close enough to be touched by it.” This is the kind of preaching Davis sees in Andrewes and seeks in contemporary preachers.

Andrewes’ preaching also helps Davis to explore the ways scripture can guide and inform preaching. “To look again and again at the words of scripture with fascination and confidence that there is something we have not yet heard—that is the most important hermeneutical practice Andrewes learned from the Fathers, and the one we may learn from him.” While Davis engages method and the requisite disposition for faithful interpretation here, she is just as interested in amplifying the reader’s focus on scripture’s content. The scripture—especially the Psalter—is a rich resource for reflection. The poetic content of the Psalms “illumine something we might otherwise have missed.” The Psalms also offer clear points of connection with the larger biblical narrative. Furthermore, while the Psalms—and the Old Testament as a whole—offer literary, historical, theological, and ethical guidance, they also provide resources for illuminating the life and work of Christ. Thus, for Davis, the Old Testament offers a significant cache of preaching content. These scriptures provide “an abundance of meaning.”

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192 Ibid. 102.
193 For instance, Davis observes: “The Bible is inexhaustibly rich in meaning, and that is the best reason to preach from it week after week” (Ibid. 66).
194 Ibid. 21.
195 Ibid. 28.
196 Ibid. 73.
197 This is the title for chapter 3 where Davis presents a slightly-modified, four-fold, Patristic reading of scripture.
Indeed it is the historical, generic, and theological content that Davis believes preachers most need to appreciate if they are to proclaim faithfully the Old Testament.198

This scriptural focus raises some interesting—and unresolved—conflicts in Davis’ thinking. For instance, how does one navigate allegory and christological typology? Initially, Davis argues that we have freedom (artistic license?) to preach Old Testament texts christologically—but not a mandate to do so.199 However, as Davis notes, in her own preaching the liturgical setting and lectionary pairings have encouraged her to read Old Testament texts (like Psalm 39) through the lens of the New Testament (in this case, Mark 14), creating a situation wherein a text of lament without resolve finds a resolution in Christ.200 In this way, Davis seems to acknowledge that aspects of the liturgical occasion can dominate hermeneutics in a way that favors the New Testament over the Old Testament—even when the sermon text is drawn from the Old Testament. And yet, the scriptural hermeneutic for which Davis advocates elsewhere argues that no illustration or outside perspective should dominate the sermon text. As Davis claims, “even a biblical illustration should remain subordinate to the text at hand. That is, the biblical illustration should not overshadow the words of the psalm.”201 With this assertion, Davis seems to raise more questions than she answers about the turn to Christ

198 “Perhaps the single best argument for the necessity of the Old Testament is that without it, we could not understand the depth of God’s involvement in our material and political existence” (Davis, Wondrous Depth 83, emphasis added).
199 Ibid. 72.
200 Ibid. 77.
201 Ibid. 29.
in Old Testament preaching and the interaction between the sermon and the rest of the liturgy.  

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Davis’ next major work on preaching returns to the intersection of liturgy, inter-biblical interpretation, and poetics. In *Preaching the Luminous Word* Davis identifies “biblical preaching” as her homiletic. By this appellation she means “preaching that takes its primary impetus from scriptural texts.” While this claim surely needs more description and critical analysis than Davis offers here, she does point the reader to several practices of interpretation and preaching that help describe the homiletic she has in mind. As Davis describes it, her homiletic entails “patient, truthful engagement with the biblical story,” being willing to enter into the world of the text rather than forcing the text to comport with our own worldview.

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202 I do not find significant distinction in Davis’s work here between the turn to Christ and the turn to other biblical stories to illustrate and/or fill out the meaning of the psalter. While one might claim that the turn to Christ is less about illustration and more about Christian identity, Davis does not clearly lay out such a claim. In fact, by not consistently turning to Christ in her sermons she seems to indicate to her reader that gospel narratives of Christ (and by extension theological reflections on Christ) are to be understood as further illustrations on which the preacher may draw with caution so as not to dominate the sermon text for the appointed day.

203 Davis, *Preaching the Luminous Word* xxii. The title, “Luminous Word” is drawn from Krister Stendhal, who said in his Beecher lectures: “The purpose of preaching is to give the text a little more room to shine” (Davis, *Preaching the Luminous Word* xxiii.)

204 Speaking on preaching Deut 34:4-5, Davis asserts, “Patient, truthful engagement with the biblical story may well be the single best way for Christians to gain that kind of spiritual strength, and some of the most helpful parts of the story may well be those that are not obviously encouraging” (Davis, *Preaching the Luminous Word* 21).

205 “The aim of Old Testament preaching, as I understand and try to practice it, is to enter into the biblical story—not just the twists and turns of plot, but also the thoughts and feelings, the kind of faith that informs its manifold witness. The aim is to enter in such a way that both preacher and hearers are sobered or comforted, as the need may be, and all of us are strengthened in our life with God” (Davis, *Preaching the Luminous Word* 28).
sustaining imaginative attention to the text as other,\textsuperscript{206} and recognizing that scripture is a collection of multi-voiced testimony.\textsuperscript{207} For our purposes the latter two points are most significant.

Davis argues that biblical preaching entails being willing and able to imagine the world through an other’s eyes. “The Scriptures are to us an ‘other’; they speak a language and express a view of reality vastly different from our own.”\textsuperscript{208} This observation is not an effort to create theological or historical distance between scripture and contemporary readers. Neither is it an attempt to marginalize the voice(s) of scripture. Rather, by recognizing scripture as other, Davis calls contemporary preachers to a different practice of reading. Such a practice requires that one reject the myth of textual mastery and eschew the delusion of (contemporary) cultural and intellectual dominance. It invites, instead, a posture of curiosity—“a genuine interest in the character and perspective of the other.”\textsuperscript{209} Such curiosity seeks to expand, strengthen, and correct one’s own perspective, attending to the text’s idioms and unique expressions rather than translating them into a dynamic equivalence or a set of overarching principles. As Davis claims, “The reward for foregoing a conceptual translation and learning to listen to the Bible on its own terms is that a more spacious world opens to us.”\textsuperscript{210}

\textsuperscript{206} Davis, \textit{Preaching the Luminous Word} 94.
\textsuperscript{207} Davis, \textit{Preaching the Luminous Word} 98.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid. Word 95.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid. 95.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid. 94.
A significant part of realizing this spacious world comes through recognizing that scripture is a collection of a collection of multiple voices that both offer testimony and invite hearers into conversation. Davis asserts:

The homiletical task is not to pronounce the immutable Truth. Rather, the preacher is to articulate the text’s multiple voices, over weeks and years, so that those voices may gradually become background against which the voices within the community are heard and their differences adjudicated.  

Here Davis proffers a couple significant observations. First, the witness of scripture is varied testimony, offered by numerous voices and perspectives. Scripture’s multi-vocal witness is properly understood as the conversation to which our own testimony is added and through which it should be evaluated. These assertions are demonstrated in Davis’ chapter on preaching Isaiah. Here she observes that despite the contemporary interest in and development of “prophetic preaching,” little attention has been given to the ways in which the Prophets’ perspectives could inform and shape prophetic preaching. Davis notes that just within Isaiah, the various redactors of the prophetic book offer us at least eight distinct words about Israel’s vocation. Some of these words are complimentary and constructive; others verge on being contradictory. As Davis sees it, the book of Isaiah calls Israel to be rooted in God’s identity as “the Holy One of Israel,” to be committed to justice and righteousness, to be corrected by divine judgment, to live in(to) God’s

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vision of Zion, to (re)fulfill its calling in historical moments, to hope for a promised returning remnant, to trust in YHWH’s shalom, and to look for God’s ultimate fulfillment in the coming future.

These themes not only help us to understand Isaiah’s message(s), but they can help inform and evaluate contemporary perspectives on our prophetic calling and preaching. Isaiah’s witness leads us to ask: how does our own prophetic preaching articulate its rootedness in God’s identity? How does it hold together justice and judgment, hope for change and lament of loss, present action and future fulfillment? How does our prophetic preaching address place and space? How does trust in YHWH’s shalom guide methods of resistance and protest? And, finally, to what extent is our own prophetic vocation like and unlike that of Israel’s? Indeed, just by reflecting upon the varied witness of the book of Isaiah, contemporary preachers can encounter a deep

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216 “…this is and is not Jerusalem or any other current political or geographic entity…a place of purging (28:15) and testing…the place where YHWH will be manifested as Redeemer (59:20; see also 62:12), as the Holy One of Israel (60:14), to bring comfort to mourners (61:3) and restore its righteousness (tsedeq, 62:1) and make its salvation known ‘to the end of the earth’ (62:11)” (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 176).
217 “In Second Isaiah, the Servant Songs give a clear picture and even let us hear the voice of the individual (or community) who upholds and is upheld by God’s justice and righteousness (9:6; 42:1, 3, 4; 53:11). It is the cumulative witness of the four Songs that divine justice is upheld through the mysterious means of exhausting labor, humiliation, death—and yet, ultimately, vindication by God” (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 177).
218 “…the book draws us forward into a future where God is doing ‘new things’ (42:9; 43:19; 48:6)” (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 177).
219 Isaiah draws out the contrast between trusting YHWH and relying on false sources of strength (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 178).
220 Isaiah ends with the calling and promise of God not fully fulfilled. New Testament books, like Revelation, pick up on this theme and include Christians as those who wait for God’s ultimate fulfillment of calling and promise (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 179).
prophetic conversation in and through which our own prophetic witness can participate and be evaluated.

Related to this first observation is a second. Namely, because scripture is testimonial conversation, there is not one, lone meaning, or truth, to be drawn from scripture. Here again Davis seems to be pushing hard against assertions like those made by Walter Kaiser, Jr. She argues that “attempts to expound the meaning—single, fixed, objectively determined—of that testimony are inherently unethical, for they fail to respect the character of this ‘other’ that is Scripture.”221 Furthermore, Davis points to a different way in which scripture speaks. She holds that the language of scripture is the language of symbol.222 Here Davis notes that prophetic literature shows more than explains.223 Thus, scripture (and by extension the scriptural sermon) does not and cannot describe God directly. It can “do no more than indicate what God is like.”224 For Davis, then, biblical preaching does not offer a timeless truth, ethical kernel, moral of the story, or practical takeaway. Rather, the sermon Davis envisions is one “crafted to generate around and

221 Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 98.
222 Davis argues, “The language of Scripture, as most premodern interpreters (both Jews and Christians) understood, is predominantly the language of symbol—something that ‘metaphysical’ preachers and poets such as the Anglicans George Herbert and John Donne also comprehended” (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 92). Furthermore, the language of the liturgy depends heavily upon symbol. This “Liturical usage” of scripture “often provides valuable clues to traditional understandings that call into question the sophistication and adequacy of contemporary readings” (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 102-3).
224 Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 96-7.
through the text thought, prayer, discussion, argument, and action—that is, all the work
that leads to true knowledge of God.”

Through her writing and preaching, Davis guides preachers toward a distinct way
of proclaiming the Old Testament. The intersection of liturgy, scriptural language, and
poetics presents a unique approach to Old Testament preaching that is rife with
possibility. First, by drawing attention to the liturgy, Davis highlights the fact the Old
Testament has a long history of featuring prominently in the proclamation of the
Church’s prayers, hymns, and sacramental liturgies. Without denying that the Old
Testament has been neglected in preaching, Davis highlights that the Old Testament is
still a regular and important source of reflection in the life of the church—especially
when one considers the amount of Old Testament texts encountered in the Daily
Lectionary of the BCP. Further, the Church’s liturgical use of the Old Testament
encourages a form of preaching that seeks the “uncommon use of common language”—
an elevation, but not supersession, of the Old Testament’s language. Second, by insisting
on scriptural language in the sermon, Davis draws the preacher’s attention to the text. The
Old Testament in itself is a word that the Church needs to hear. That is, these scriptures
do not need to be solved by the New Testament nor layered over with theological
explanation. The voices and perspectives of the Old Testament offer important
proclamation to the Church today. Even illustrations should not detract from Old
Testament texts and their way of speaking. In this way, Davis emphasizes the importance
of the Old Testament without resorting to promise-fulfillment, christological typology, or

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225 Davis, *Preaching the Luminous Word* 105.
inductive/thematic schemata. Finally, by pointing to the poetic use of language, Davis highlights the symbolic, illustrative ways in which the Old Testament seeks to describe God, Israel, and the world. Further, the Old Testament is multi-vocal and dialogical. Witnesses within this Testament confirm, build upon, contradict, and (re)create the perspectives of other scriptural witnesses. Preaching poetically entails listening to the unique perspectives of these witnesses without resorting to theological systemization or mining for moralistic kernels.

It is good that in Preaching the Luminous Word, Davis begins to develop consciously her “biblical preaching” homiletic, because Davis’ lack of attention to method is the greatest weakness of her work. Friends and colleagues have noted this lacuna, and even Davis herself has acknowledged this as a deficiency. The effect of

226 In the forward to Preaching the Luminous Word, Stanley Hauerwas observes that Davis’ approach is “blessedly free of theory” (Stanley Hauerwas, “Forward” in Ellen Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2016) xv). Hauerwas attempts to portray this omission as an asset. He observes, “Davis is simply not a theory-driven person. She does not worry whether this or that theologian will or will not agree with her reading of a text” (xv). This striking sentiment highlights the well-intentioned—but dubious—claim that Hauerwas is making about Davis here. Davis has asked a theologian to write the forward to her book on preaching. She clearly cares about theology and theologians. She also invited homiletician, Austin McIver Dennis, to contribute to the book. Such care makes questions about Davis’ omission of homiletic theology all the more pronounced. Hauerwas seems to sense this challenge in Davis’ work. He claims Davis “does not need homiletical theory because she has something more significant: the text and her exegetically informed imagination” (Hauerwas, “Forward” in Preaching the Luminous Word, xvi). Of course, such a sentiment is itself a spartan and underdeveloped homiletic, which at the same time inexplicably (and falsely) portrays homiletics as unnecessary for preaching.

227 In another publication, Davis writes: “While I choose my words with care (and am a manuscript preacher, so what you read here is what was spoken from the pulpit), rhetoric is not an area in which I am competent to teach or think in any depth. I am an Old Testament scholar, and the focus of my teaching is how the church may draw upon and
inadequately addressing homiletic method is not only that Davis misses out on the opportunity to locate her perspective within contemporary homiletic conversations, it is not just that the reader is left with insufficient guidance to engage in the kind of preaching Davis envisions—nor even is it that a lack of methodological reflection leads Davis at times to problematic generic evaluations (e.g. “The best poems persuade us to think and act differently”). The most significant effect of inadequately addressing homiletic method is that Davis does not—or is not equipped to—process the power dynamics of many of her hermeneutic and homiletic claims. For instance, as mentioned above, Davis’ homiletic does not adequately address how one should handle the history of christological readings of the Old Testament, nor does she fully acknowledge the way the liturgy shapes sermonic expectations. Hermeneutically, Davis claims, “Historical study of the Bible…discourages us from imposing our cultural assumptions upon a world we do not readily comprehend.” However, methodological reflection would demonstrate that, starting with Julius Wellhausen, historical method has not been free of cultural assumptions and biases of all sorts.

At another moment, Davis lifts up the Old Testament preaching example of Jesus and Paul. While much can be learned from New Testament use of the Old Testament, be guided by the biblical text in its ministries” (Ellen Davis, “Preaching as Seeing,” 96–102 in Touching the Altar 102).

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228 Davis, Wondrous Depth 24, emphasis added.
229 Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 102.
230 “Looking regularly for how Jesus, or the evangelists, or Paul and other New Testament writers read the Hebrew Scriptures might go a long way toward refreshing and deepening New Testament preaching” (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 247). Elsewhere Davis writes, “I do not consider Old Testament preaching and New Testament preaching as distinct activities” (Davis, Preaching the Luminous Word 245). While Davis’ intent is to claim that both the Old Testament and New Testament are scripture
Davis does not acknowledge—much less process—that a key difference between Jesus, Paul, and the contemporary preacher is that, in most cases, the contemporary preacher is not a Jew in the midst of a theological debate with other Jews. There is a different power dynamic occurring when gentile Christians preach the Old Testament. Perhaps, because of our social location, there are words and theological moves that Jesus and Paul can speak, but that we should not repeat. Davis, is right to work from the assumption that there is no inherent problem or flaw with the Old Testament. However, by not addressing the perception problem of other hermeneutics, nor countering these hermeneutics with her own developed hermeneutic, Davis misses an opportunity to further advance preaching of the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, Davis is well-equipped to consider hermeneutics and power dynamics within Old Testament homiletics in her future work. For instance, it could prove quite helpful to contemporary preachers if Davis were to write more about the ways she believes Israelite poetry might inform a poetic homiletic. And, her experience teaching and reading the Old Testament with Jews, Muslims, and people of other faiths might offer models for preaching that navigates faithfully the power dynamics of economic, cultural, and theological location. And, at any rate, criticism of Davis’ lack of methodological reflection should not diminish the helpful ways in which her work has pointed Old Testament preaching toward liturgical, scriptural, and poetic language.

that should be preached equally, it is not evident that the way to accomplish this goal is to minimize all differences between the Testaments and paint over the fact that New Testament theology has dominated the way the Old Testament is read and preached in Christian congregations.
2.5. Rein Bos

Whereas Davis averts her attention from methodological considerations to focus upon specific texts and sermons, Rein Bos focuses primarily upon an extended study of hermeneutic and homiletic methods for preaching the Old Testament. Bos is a Lutheran pastor and scholar from the Netherlands. By his own account, he has been shaped by his country’s resistance to the Nazi occupation during World War II and many stories of Dutch solidarity and suffering along with Jews. Some of these stories are discussed in what follows. Having more than experiential knowledge, Bos’s thought is significantly shaped by Dutch theology, especially the writings of K. H. Miskotte, who articulates a prominent role for the Old Testament in theology and preaching that is distinct among continental Europe of the mid Twentieth century. This too is discussed below.

Bos has long been interested in questions related to preaching the Old Testament. In his 1992 dissertation published in Dutch, Bos explores the possibilities for identification in preaching the Old Testament. Bos differentiates two points of identification. One can connect with an object (figure/person) in a text, or one can connect the style of the text with the style of the sermon. In this model, sermon prep consists of discerning the “identification-object” on which to focus, examining and “profiling” the identification-object both to discover content and to avoid illegitimate analogies, and, finally, broadening the identification-object by turning to fields like systematic and pastoral theology, psychology, and cultural studies.

232 Bos *Identificatie* 369.
233 Ibid. 373.
These early methodological approaches are expanded in *We Have Heard that God is with You*. Here Bos critiques what he calls the “hermeneutical keys” from the Church’s history—namely allegory, typology, promise-and-fulfillment, salvation-history, and Karl Barth’s approach.\(^{234}\) Allegory, Bos observes, can connect Old Testament, New Testament, and contemporary situations, but it spiritualizes the “material character of God’s goodness” and risks “disconnecting the Old Testament from Israel and the Jewish context.”\(^{235}\) Typology responds to historical forms, but in pointing forward (usually to Christ) it presents the Old Testament as “a temporary truth” to be superseded by progressive revelation.\(^{236}\) Promise-and-fulfillment presents a way to underscore the power of God’s word, but it often does so by mis-categorizing other Old Testament genres, ignoring fulfillment within the Old Testament, treating Old Testament figures as largely ignorant about the meaning of their own words, and mis-categorizing the New Testament as a book of fulfillment that does not also include promise.\(^{237}\) Salvation-history presents an apparent canonical approach that addresses Old Testament texts, but in stressing the unidirectional progress of the story this approach is less rooted in a particular text (especially an Old Testament one) and more likely to offer a cursory treatment of the Old Testament (often as history) in favor of proclaiming the New Testament’s theology.\(^{238}\) Such a move tends to present “the Jews” as irrelevant to the


\(^{235}\) Ibid. 26-7.

\(^{236}\) Ibid. 41-42.

\(^{237}\) Ibid. 55-56.

\(^{238}\) Ibid. 69-70.
“new true Israel.” Finally, Bos asserts that Karl Barth’s approach, which identifies God as the one who is revealed “uniquely and exclusively in Jesus Christ,” values the Old Testament in that it (too) bears witness to Christ and is, thus, a relevant source for Christian preaching. However, Bos critiques this approach as “a higher kind of allegory”—one that flattens history and largely ignores the particular voices of the Old Testament.

In lieu of any of these hermeneutical keys, Bos proposes an approach that focuses on a four-fold sense of scripture: sensus Israelicus, Christological sense, ecclesiological sense, and eschatological sense. Obviously, this approach is also rooted in the hermeneutics of the early Church, but it differs in telling ways. By sensus Israelicus Bos refers to the original meaning of the text and to insights from Jewish interpretation of the text. More than a literal reading, this sense calls for preachers to “be aware and make the congregation aware of the fact that Israel was not only the first addressee of God’s message of merciful love from a historical point of view, but Israel is still the first addressee.” The Christological sense seeks to follow the “creative grammar” of the apostles and evangelists, treating Old Testament readings as if they were words spoken by, addressed to, and spoken about Christ. Bos states that the goal of this reading is to emphasize the unity of God’s words and actions in scripture, portraying Israel’s God and

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239 Ibid. 70.
240 Ibid. 92.
241 Ibid. 94. This functional and theological neglect is often despite Barth’s own statements about how valuable Israel or the synagogue is.
242 Ibid. 169.
243 Ibid. 168.
244 Ibid. 172-3.
Israel’s way in Jesus. The Ecclesiological sense seeks to treat all scripture as a word for the people of faith. Bos asserts, “for apostles and evangelists the Old Testament did not take its end in Jesus Christ. The authors of the New Testament connect Moses and the prophets frankly and candidly with their own context, with the situation of the young church.” Finally, the Eschatological sense reads scripture looking for what God will do in the future. Here Bos asserts that Old Testament eschatology can be especially helpful as a corrective for misguided Christian views. First, it illustrates that Israel never gave up the validity of God’s promises. Second, Old Testament eschatology is not simply otherworldly but looks for “a restoration of existence in this world” while also expressing a longing for “someone-to-come.”

In many ways Bos improves on the field of Old Testament preaching. First, he shows some awareness of the power dynamics involved in reading the Old Testament. Bos cuts at Christian supersessionism by asserting that the Old Testament is originally written for Jews and continues today to refer first to Jews. He also pushes against

245 Ibid. 218-220.
246 Ibid. 177.
247 Ibid. 174.
248 Ibid. 178.
249 Ibid. 178.
250 Ibid. 178.
251 Still, Bos might have done more to underscore this valuing of Israel and Judaism. At best, his approach offers a mixed message. For instance, in a summary statement about his approach, Bos writes, “The homiletical and interpretative model presented here is characterized by the notions of encounter and engagement, mutuality, and abiding anchorage place—all of which embrace the meaning of ‘old’ in Old Testament” (345). The first half of this statement—while not overtly valuing the Hebrew Bible in its Jewish sense—seeks to foster an appreciation of these texts as scriptures that engage the life of the Church. However, the second half of the summary statement seems to emphasize—
salvation history and promise-fulfillment models, both of which minimize the impact and importance of the Old Testament. Further, in an interview from 2017, Bos lifts up scholars who argue for the importance and originality of the Old Testament. Specifically, Bos highlights German homiletician Ernst Lange’s thesis that the preached Old Testament is a word that is new and notwendig (necessary/essential)—hence not historically or culturally distant. Bos also features the Dutch theologian, K. H. Miskotte, who argues that there is a surplus of content in the Old Testament that is not seen in the New Testament. He agrees with A.A. Van Ruler’s argument that the Old Testament is the actual bible and the New Testament is an explanatory commentary. And Bos affirms Hans Walter Wolff’s assertion that Christianity suffers from gnosticism and is in great need of the Old Testament’s embodied insights and commitments to justice. Perhaps most notably, Bos’s own preaching reflects an awareness of this dynamic. Having served the same congregation in Putten, Netherlands, for 27 years, Bos has long worked to “cultivate an Old Testament imagination.”

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254 See Kornelis Heiko Miskotte, *When the Gods Are Silent* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). This surplus includes skepsis, resistance, erotics (bodily), and politics.
the congregation of the gentiles.”258 The effect of all this, Bos claims, is that his congregation knows and thinks through the lens of the Old Testament—often making connections to the Old Testament even when Bos preaches on the New Testament.259

A second way that Bos’s work improves on Old Testament preaching is that he roots the christological hermeneutic in New Testament practice rather than in Patristic exegesis—this despite the echoes of the latter in his 4-fold model. Some scholars have argued that the authors of the New Testament have a more expansive appreciation of the function and perspective of the Old Testament. For instance, Chris Seitz finds that there are many places where the New Testament is silent because the authors expect us to also be listening to the Old Testament (e.g. royal passages in Isaiah). Thus, Seitz argues, the Old Testament is presented as authoritative in that the New Testament both refers to and defers to the Old Testament.260 Kendall Soulen points to a similar dynamic when he writes, “The Lord’s history with Israel does not prepare for the gospel but surrounds the gospel as its constant horizon, context, and goal.”261

A third improvement that Bos offers the field of Old Testament preaching comes in his development of the idea that the ecclesiological word speaks to “today.” This simple move not only expands on a strict, historical approach, but it undermines a strict,

258 Ibid.
259 Ibid.
christological reading of the Old Testament. Bos claims that scripture is not wholly subsumed in its reference to Christ. It points beyond Christ, beyond itself, to (at least) the contemporary congregation (though not without reference to the contemporary synagogue).

Finally, Bos’s work is helpful in that it highlights that Christians—like Jews—await God’s eschatological promises to be fulfilled. In this way “promise and fulfillment” is not a dividing line between Old Testament and New Testament, nor a method of distinguishing Jew and Christian. Rather, “promise and fulfillment” describes a Jewish/Christian understanding of the way God works in scripture and in God’s past, present, and future interaction with the world.

While there is much to appreciate about Bos, his work still presents the Old Testament in several problematic ways. Initially, one might ask whether *sensus Israelicus* would function in a substantially different way than a literal reading does in Patristic exegesis. In other words, does *sensus Israelicus* become simply a hoop to jump through to get to the more pressing christological and ecclesiological readings? Bos’s chief concern seems to be combatting anti-semitic readings. What he is hesitant to offer, however, is a constructive approach to reading with and learning from Jewish hermeneutics. He even states that Christians do not have to try to read like Jews or “imitate Jewish exegetical methods.” But why not? If preachers can learn from Patristic interpretation, if we can learn from historical critics and literary theorists, why should preachers not seek to learn from those who have been reading and interpreting

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262 Bos, *We Have Heard that God is with You* 187.
these scriptures longer than Christians have? His use of *sensus Israelicus* here implies—
contrary to his intentions—that the Jewishness of the text and Jewish interpretation of the
text are beneath Christian consideration.

Learning from Jewish hermeneutics is precisely the approach that scholars like
Alexander Deeg commend as not only useful, but necessary.263 A later chapter will
examine Deeg’s work more fully. For our current purposes, note that Bos surely could
have strengthened his proposal for a four-fold reading if he had engaged the Jewish
tradition of PaRDeS. Like its Christian hermeneutical counterpart, PaRDeS commends a
multilevel reading of scripture. Briefly, Peshat (פֵּשַׁת) refers to a straight or direct reading.
Remez (רֶמֶץ) examines the text for hints into a deeper, symbolic meaning. Derash (דרש)
seeks the text’s meaning in comparison with other texts and occurrences. Finally, Sod
(סוֹד) refers to a "secret" or mystical meaning. By comparing the uses and understandings
of PaRDeS and traditional Christian four-fold readings Bos may have gained new insights
into his proposed approach.264

For instance, in the Talmud there is a parable about PaRDeS that could prove a
helpful corrective for the Christian tradition’s tendency to favor the mystical or spiritual

263 Alexander Deeg, “Imagination and Meticulousness: Haggadah and Halakhah in
Judaism and Christian Preaching” *Homiletic* 34 no 1 2009. Specifically, Deeg proposes
three theses: (1) “From the rabbis, Christian preaching can learn an expectant adherence
to the word and discover this meticulousness as a precondition to homiletic imagination”
(6). (2) “Christian preaching can learn from the rabbis to trust the illustrations and
concrete expressions and to discover this imagination as a remedy against the burden of
concepts and abstract deductions” (8). (3) “Christian preaching can learn from the rabbis
how to bring ethics and aesthetics into a provocative interplay, and in doing so not forget
common, everyday matters” (9).

264 Note, for example, that derash is often used to refer to preaching. As such, it would
make for an interesting comparison with Bos’s ecclesiological sense—the move that
seeks to treat all scripture as a word for contemporary people of faith.
reading of the scripture. The parable plays upon the four-fold reading model and upon *pardes*, meaning orchard and implying paradise. Here four men enter *pardes*—Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and Rabbi Akiva. Ben Azzai looked at the Divine Presence and lost his life; Ben Zoma looked and lost his sanity; Acher looked and lost his faith; Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and departed in peace. The commentary on this parable sounds a note of warning about jumping too quickly to hidden, Divine Presence (or mystical meaning) of scripture. Acher is perhaps already doomed to heresy; his name means “other.” However, ben Azzai and ben Zoma seem to be faithful and astute students of Torah. Still they suffer loss. Only Rabbi Akiva enters and departs in peace. He does so because he seems to be the only one to have mastered the other three ways of reading in *pardes*. In this way, he is the only one prepared to encounter the Divine Presence.

This parable cuts at hermeneutical hubris. It narrates that the mystical meaning is not for preaching; it is not meant as a quotidian word nor something for everyday people in the pews. In fact, like ben Azzai and ben Zoma, most scholars are not advanced

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265 I am grateful to Iris Marsh, a Ph.D. student in Hebrew Bible at Bar Elon and my colleague at Universität Leipzig, for calling this Talmudic account to my attention.

266 Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 14b: “The Gemara proceeds to relate what happened to each of them: Ben Azzai glimpsed at the Divine Presence and died. And with regard to him the verse states: “Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His pious ones” (Psalm 116:15). Ben Zoma glimpsed at the Divine Presence and was harmed, i.e., he lost his mind. And with regard to him the verse states: “Have you found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for you, lest you become full from it and vomit it” (Proverbs 25:16). Acher chopped down the shoots of saplings. In other words, he became a heretic. Rabbi Akiva came out safely” (https://www.sefaria.org/Chagigah.14b.9?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en accessed 11/27/2018).

267 For instance, Hagigah 14b describes ben Zoma as “an expert interpreter of the Torah” who “could find obscure proofs.” Even Acher (perhaps Elisha ben Avuya) is said to have “merits” (Hagigah 15a).
enough to engage in its study. Surely this Jewish “no” to spiritual hermeneutics has something to say to Christian interpretative and homiletical traditions.

By attending to Jewish resources like the PaRDeS parable, Rein Bos could have engaged rich resources for deepening and fine-tuning his approach to a hermeneutic that seeks to value Jewish voices.\textsuperscript{268} I do not intend to say here that Bos must analyze PaRDeS, per se. Rather, I mention PaRDeS to highlight how untenable it is to claim to seek a hermeneutic that is inclusive of Israel and yet does not require Christians to have any real encounter with Jews or Jewish exegetical methods. Thus, while Bos raises awareness about Christian anti-semitic readings of the Old Testament, and while he cautions against such repeated abuses, one might rightly question whether the perspective he presents in this book does enough to inculcate in his readers an appreciation of and an engagement with Jewish interpretation. Bos may assuage some Christian guilt for past sins, but he doesn’t seem to offer enough here to lead to Christian repentance and transformation. In the end, Bos does not even claim to offer a hermeneutic to guide his readers. Instead he proposes a “heuristic” that preachers may (or may not) use for their interpretation of Old Testament texts.\textsuperscript{269}

\textsuperscript{268} For instance, Bos mostly limits consideration of Jewish voices to the obscurant sensus Israelicus which is then connected in Christian imagination with the most simplistic level of reading the text—i.e. the literal. Yet, with an analysis of PaRDeS, Bos could have foregrounded Jewish ways of reading in all four of his approaches to scripture.\textsuperscript{269} Bos, \textit{We Have Heard that God is with You} 344. Bos states further here that the four senses of scripture do not make a “hermeneutical lasagna,” nor are they a checklist for sermon preparation, nor even should all four be mentioned in the “actual sermon” (344-5). Bos also reiterated all these points in my interview with him in Putten, Netherlands, on January 23, 2017.
While there may be several reasons Bos takes this approach—including, I suspect, the pressures of ecclesial politics and the economic pressures of publishing a book that sells—there may be a larger reason why Bos is not more insistent on engaging Jewish interpretation. As he makes clear in multiple places, Bos is committed to a christological articulation of good news. In a summary statement about his approach, Bos states, “The way of Jesus is the way of both Israel and the Lord and vice versa. There is no later or earlier in this hermeneutical strategy, no more or less.”

While Bos intends this statement to be ameliorating and reconciling, he, nevertheless, participates in the same interpretative dynamic that has made the Old Testament irrelevant in Christian circles. Stated another way, if Jesus is the fullness of Israel and the fullness of God (i.e. the Lord) then why do Christian preachers need the Old Testament? Would it not be more clear and more efficient to read about Jesus in the gospels? This may sound like a *reductio ad absurdum*; yet, a German scholar recently suggested precisely this possibility. Notger Slenczka claims that what Christians need is Jesus, not the Old Testament! Of course, Bos would rightly reject such an outlandish claim. But, if, as Bos claims, Christ is the one who connects the Testaments, if Christ provides entry into the Old Testament, if Jesus is the same as “the Lord”—and if Bos remains committed to a homiletic that asserts that

270 Ibid. 346.
one does not preach the text but “the gospel” that is somehow beyond the text.\(^{272}\) then we might rightly wonder what role is left for Jewish interpretation? What need is there even for the Old Testament when the Jewishness of this Testament, its distinct naming of God, and its articulations of good news become simply a problem to be managed with christological overlays?

Thus, while Bos offers a strong critique of previous Christian hermeneutics, and while he draws attention to anti-semitism and power dynamics that have affected traditional Christian interpretation, his work does not draw the preacher enough into the Old Testament scriptures nor into a hermeneutic that effectively navigates the dynamics of anti-semitism.

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\(^{272}\) Bos makes this claim in my interview with him: “We do not preach a text; we preach the gospel from the particular lens of a text” (David Stark’s interview with Rein Bos, Putten, Netherlands, January 23, 2017). He makes a similar claim in a recent essay. In an article entitled, “Preaching Gospel from the Old Testament,” Bos argues that preachers should use the Heidelberg catechism as a Rule of Faith to guide their preaching on the Old Testament (Rein Bos, “Preaching Gospel from the Old Testament,” 29–44 in Preaching Gospel: Essays in Honor of Richard Lischer (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016) 36). Agreeing with Ed Farley, Bos asserts, “we preach not the Bible but the Gospel” (Ed Farley, Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 82). To this debatable assertion, which seems to push toward theology at the expense of scripture, Bos adds his own doubts about the efficacy of some biblical texts. He writes, “It is evident that not every text or pericope has enough kerygmatic capacity to proclaim the gospel in its fulness. And that is not only true for Old Testament texts!” (Bos, “Preaching Gospel,” 31). At the same time, Bos finds ample kerygmatic fodder in the Old Testament for christological proclamations. He claims, “The books of Moses and the prophets are, so to speak, inclined and ready to be expanded by a skilled preacher in the context of the Christian community of faith. Within both the limits and the space given by the Rule of Faith, we can expand an Old Testament text so that it becomes a witness to Jesus Christ” (Bos, “Preaching Gospel” 39). Taken together, Bos shows himself in this article to be little interested in preaching Old Testament texts, engaging Jewish interpretation, or seriously considering perspectives beyond Christian theology as constructed in the Heidelberg Catechism.
2.6. Walter Brueggemann

Perhaps, Walter Brueggemann needs no introduction. He is a prolific writer, producing well over 50 books and numerous articles in his career. Ordained in the United Church of Christ, Brueggemann studied at Elmhurst College and Eden Theological Seminary. He earned doctorates from Union Theological Seminary in New York and from Saint Louis University. He taught at Eden Theological Seminary and at Columbia Theological Seminary, and is known for his work on prophetic imagination and progressive Christianity.

Brueggemann has written commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 1 and 2 Samuel, Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.273 At the same time, Brueggemann is arguably the most cited Old Testament scholar in homiletic works. For the last 40 years he—more than anyone—has shaped the way homileticians and pastors have approached the Old Testament. Brueggemann’s work and influence are so vast that they cannot be examined here fully.

What can be accomplished here is a sketch of the major emphases of his work and a reflection on its homiletic impact. Brueggemann invites such a thematic approach to his work by returning to The Prophetic Imagination with a 40th anniversary edition in 2018

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and by reflecting more overtly on the way this book impacts preaching in his 2012 book, The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word. In fact, Brueggemann has referred to The Prophetic Imagination as both “my first publication in which I more-or-less found my own voice as a teacher in the church,”274 and as “the paradigm” that “has functioned as leitmotif for much of my subsequent work.”275

In The Prophetic Imagination Brueggemann argues, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”276 Here Brueggemann contrasts the dominant, “royal imagination” with the “prophetic imagination.” Royal imagination—as modeled especially in Pharaoh, Solomon,277 and Nebuchadnezzar—advocates for affluence (not widely shared),278 oppressive social policy (taking advantage of free or cheap labor),279 and static religion (placing God under the state’s control).280 Conversely, prophetic imagination—modeled especially in

276 Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination. Second Edition. 3
277 For instance, Brueggemann highlights elements of the royal consciousness in Solomon’s reforms: harem, tax, bureaucracy, standing army, fascination with wisdom, conscripted labor (Prophetic Imagination 24).
278 As Brueggemann describes: “the affluence and prosperity so attested is not democratically shared” (Prophetic Imagination 26).
279 “Obviously some people lived well off the efforts of others” (Prophetic Imagination 27). At the same time, Breuggemann notes: “Justice and freedom are inherently promissory; but this regime could not tolerate promises, for they question the present oppressive ordering and threaten the very foundations of current self-serving” (Prophetic Imagination 28).
280 Such “establishment of a controlled, static religion in which God and his temple have become part of the royal landscape, subordinates the sovereignty of God (Prophetic
Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah—seeks an “economics of equality,” “the politics of justice,” and “the religion of God’s freedom.”

Three points of Brueggemann’s argument on the prophetic imagination are especially pertinent to this study on preaching the Old Testament:

First, Brueggemann calls for a focus upon the effect of the language of scripture. As one might expect a biblical scholar to do, Brueggemann includes copious examples of scriptural texts to illustrate his argument. More than proof-texting, however, Brueggemann exegetes these texts to highlight the message’s impact on ancient audiences and to reflect on its impact on contemporary audiences. With this move Brueggemann seeks to emphasize the unique voices of scripture as testimonial perspectives that need to be heard in their own right. (More on this below).

Here too Brueggemann draws on rhetorical criticism to highlight the artfulness of the scriptural language employed. The prophetic imagination is a poetic counter to the royal agenda. Brueggemann agrees with David Noel Freedman, claiming, “the characteristic way of a prophet in Israel is that of poetry and lyric. The prophet engages in futuring fantasy.” Key to Brueggemann’s argument is that the prophet does not

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*Prophetic Imagination* 28). It “assures ready sanction to every notion of the king because there can be no transcendent resistance or protest,” and at the same time, it “gives the king a monopoly so that no marginal person may approach this God except on the king’s terms” (*Prophetic Imagination* 29).

281 Brueggemann claims that the prophetic imagination begins in the ministry of Moses who breaks radically with Pharaoh’s social reality (*Prophetic Imagination* 5).

282 Ibid. 31.

283 It should be noted that in The Prophetic Imagination, Brueggemann does not limit his audience to preaching or public protests. “When we think ‘prophetic’ we need not always think grandly about public tasks” (Ibid. 40).

284 Ibid. 40.
primarily argue, persuade, rail against, “scold or reprimand.” Rather, the prophetic imagination engages in offering symbols to confront horror, expressing fears with metaphor and honesty, and naming deathliness with the candor of lament. The goal of this aspect of prophetic imagination is “to cut through the numbness, to penetrate the self-deception, so that the God of endings is confessed as Lord.” This poetic-prophetic endeavor highlights homiletic possibilities for engaging Old Testament texts—not as a mere history lesson, or christological mine, or information for argumentation, but—as a word that speaks, names, unmasks, hopes, moves, enacts, and empowers.

Related to this first point is a second: Brueggemann highlights Deutero-Isaiah as the preaching example for energizing people to combat the royal consciousness. While Jeremiah is his model for expressing lament and loss, Brueggemann sees in Second Isaiah “the peculiar paradigm for a prophet of hope.” To this end, Second Isaiah employs a clear rhetorical strategy for energizing exilic peoples. The poet-prophet offers “speeches

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285 Ibid. 46.
286 Prophetic imagination seeks: 1) “To offer symbols that are adequate to confront the horror and massiveness of the experience that evokes numbness and requires denial;” 2) “To bring to public expression those very fears and terrors that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we do not know they are there. Not with analytic speech or coercion but with metaphor and honest articulations;” and 3) “To speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathless that hovers over us and gnaws within us, and to speak neither in rage nor with cheap grace, but with the candor born of anguish and passion” (Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination 45). Examples of poetic language that Brueggemann cites here include the exodus as a symbol of divine deliverance, fears are expressed with questions like, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” (Jer 8:22), and death is lamented with lines like “My anguish, my anguish! I write in pain! Oh, the walls of my hearts!” (Jer 4:19-20).
287 Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination 45.
288 Ibid. 68.
of hope and doxology,”289 deals with despair,290 “makes it possible to sing,”291 models “discernment of God in all his freedom,”292 dismantles “the structures of weariness,”293 and dethrones the “powers of fatigue.”294 Such work necessarily includes the use of imagery such as the new song for a new (emerging) reality, birth to the barren as the metaphorical opening of the future, and abundant nourishment that does not depend upon imperial control.295 In this way, Brueggemann portrays Second Isaiah as scripture that preaches. These chapters and verses are not merely something that can be preached today. Rather, Second Isaiah has preached to exilic peoples and is still preaching today.

Brueggemann’s argument here is not merely that the text is homiletical because it employs rhetorical devices. He is equally intrigued with the way Second Isaiah engages other scripture. For example, in the first verses of Isaiah 40, Brueggemann sees the poet-prophet as one who “responds to Jeremiah’s Rachel who refuses to be comforted (Jer 31:15). He speaks directly to and against the poems of Lamentations that found ‘none to comfort’ (Lam 1:2, 16, 17, 21).”296 A few verses later, in Isa 40:9-10, Brueggemann

289 Ibid. 68.
290 Ibid. 70.
291 “The prophet makes it possible to sing and the empire knows that people who can boldly sing, have not accepted the royal definition of reality” (Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination 71).
292 Ibid. 72.
293 Ibid. 72.
294 Ibid. 72.
295 Ibid. 74-6. Brueggemann writes: “new song time is a way to sing a new social reality as the freedom songs stood behind every freedom act” (74); “‘birth’ then comes to be taken metaphorically as the opening of a future and the generation of an alternative by the miraculous power of God” (75), and “If you eat the bread fo Babylon for too long you will be destroyed…but Israelites who are exiles will not accommodate that imperial bread” (76).
296 Ibid. 69.
observes a connection with Exodus and the Song of the Sea: “It is as though Second Isaiah means to bring Israel back to the doxology of Moses.”

In this way, Second Isaiah provides a model (or models) for how preachers might engage and proclaim other texts of the Old Testament. Here, the poet-prophet does not merely rearrange pieces. Rather, as Brueggemann articulates:

Second Isaiah gives his people a remarkable gift. He gives them back their faith by means of rearticulating the old story. He gives them the linguistic capacity to confront despair rather than be surrounded by it. And he creates new standing ground outside the dominant consciousness upon which new humanness is possible.

The poet-preacher draws upon scriptures that exiles might see as old or irrelevant, employs imaginative rhetorical devices, and rearticulates the old story all in an effort to proclaim a message that confronts the realities of the present moment. This is a homiletic turn that demands attention from any who would seek to improve their preaching—and especially any who wish to improve their Old Testament preaching.

*Finally, Brueggemann asserts that the prophetic imagination points to the presence of God in ways that critique the imperial abuse of religion.* God must be free from the control of the royal imagination. For Brueggemann, such a critique applies to

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297 Ibid. 70.
298 “This great poet of the exile understood that speech that rearranges the pieces and that echoes the management mentality of it contemporaries is not worth the bother” (Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* 68).
299 Ibid. 77.
foreign deities employed in service to empire and to many of Solomon’s reforms. It also applies to an uncritical doctrine of immanence, wherein “God is so present to us that his abrasiveness, his absence, his banishment are not noticed.”

Related to his critique of immanence, Brueggemann raises serious questions about messianism. This doctrine upholds “the Davidic king not only as an important historical accident but also as a necessary agent of God’s ultimate purposes.” To be clear, Brueggemann does not claim that messianism is inherently problematic. One can be anointed by God to serve as “an advocate for the marginal ones.” Still, Brueggemann notes that messianism is a major theological contribution from the Solomonic era, and since that era challenges Moses’ reforms and favors the royal consciousness, we should receive it with a healthy skepticism. As Brueggemann asserts, “theologically, tenth-century monarchic Israel moved against the revolution for the freedom of God and the politics of justice and freedom.”

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300 Brueggemann notes that Second Isaiah contrasts two kinds of gods: one, an idol, that wears you out on behalf of imperial purposes and the other who is a “god who is free, able, and willing to take responsibility for his goodness” (Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination 72-3).

301 Brueggemann argues that once the temple becomes part of the royal landscape, “God is now ‘on call’ and access to him is controlled by the royal court” (Prophetic Imagination 29). Furthermore, such a move eliminates transcendent (theological) resistance to the king and religious protest from the oppressed (29). Bureggemann also critiques the formal development of “creation faith,” which is the argument that ‘the king—temple—royal city complex is the guarantor of both social and cosmic order” (33). Rather than pushing for justice, this doctrine was used to emphasize control, order, and the silencing of the oppressed and needy (33).

302 Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination 36.

303 Ibid. 34.

304 Ibid. 34.

305 Ibid. 35.
Thus, Brueggemann sees in messianism a negative purpose which is more realistic to its intended function in the Solomonic era. “As the king takes on increasing significance and power and is assigned an enduring role in the purposes of God, the primary vision becomes the well-being and enhancement of the king per se and not the role of advocate for the marginal.” Thus, messianism as a doctrine of convenient immanence that blesses the King’s actions and undergirds his authority, can be manipulated as a tool for domination. Under the control of royal imagination, messianism enables the kingship to become “an agent of greater exploitation by the powerful.”

Brueggemann’s observations about this tenth century theological development raise important questions far beyond historiography. The theological question of messianism’s intended and realistic impact is also a contemporary question. It calls modern interpreters and preachers to reflect on the power dynamics at work in their own use of messianism, for surely it is not only Solomon who construes messiah to be “an agent of greater exploitation by the powerful.” As the history of the Church shows, even Jesus as messiah—when combined with a royal imagination—can become a tool to marginalize, oppress, and kill in support of the interest of a powerful few.

Unfortunately, Brueggemann does not respond directly to this contemporary theological question in *The Prophetic Imagination*. He does, however, offer some clues in his writing to his own approach. He encourages contemporary preachers and priests to wrestle with their own doctrine of immanence and divine accessibility. He presses for

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306 Ibid. 34.
307 Ibid. 34.
308 Ibid. 29.
more attention to God’s sovereignty and transcendence. He also draws more attention to the Mosaic covenant. Brueggemann offers assertions like: “speech about hope must be primarily theological…must be in the language of covenant between a personal God and a community.”

Again, Brueggemann does not reject messianism. He does seem to wrestle with its application to Jesus. It is striking that a book on the prophetic imagination concludes with two chapters on Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. This raises the question of how Jesus’ messianism is employed. Here Brueggemann seems to offer a mixed witness. On the one hand, he refers to Jesus as someone who is faithful to the prophetic imagination. This implies continuity in mission that began with (and is evaluated by) God’s work in the prophets. This also points to an understanding of Jesus’ messianism as that which is opposed to royal interpretations of it. Relatedly, in other places Brueggemann presents Jesus and the prophets as sharing together in the same work of prophetically challenging empire’s abuse of messianism.

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309 Ibid. 65.
310 “Jesus, in his sayings concerning weariness and rest and changing yokes [Matt 11:28—30] is faithful to Second Isaiah” (Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination 72).
311 “Without detracting from the historical singularity of the resurrection, we can also affirm that it is of a piece with the earlier appearances of an alternative future by the prophetic word. The resurrection of Jesus made possible a future for the disinherited. In the same way, the alternative community of Moses was given a new future by the God who brought freedom for slaves by his powerful word, which both dismantled and created a future and which engaged in radical energizing and radical criticizing. In the same way, the resurrection of Jesus made possible a future for the disinherited, as did the newness announced by Second Isaiah” (Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination 113, emphasis added).
On the other hand, Brueggemann presents Jesus as the *fulfillment* and *perfect example* of the prophetic imagination.\(^\text{312}\) Here Jesus becomes the model-messiah who is the standard that evaluates the prophetic tradition. Similarly, at other times Brueggemann portrays Jesus as the *ultimate* prophetic imaginer.\(^\text{313}\) The cross is the ultimate prophetic metaphor; Jesus is the ultimate energizer against empire; Christ’s way is the ultimate critique of royal imagination. While one could hear these assertions as standard Christian theology, it is important to notice that Christ as the “fulfillment” and “ultimate” enactor of prophetic ministry participates in a particular, Christian domination of the category in a way that Brueggemann’s earlier “faithful” and “sharing” approaches do not.

This juxtaposition of approaches, within a book so focused on the use and abuse of power, raises the question of how one might identify imperial uses of messianism in our own day. Here Brueggemann’s analysis of historical, theological, and inter-textual nuances of the royal imagination are helpful for our evaluation. Historically, Brueggemann argues that imperial uses of messianism seek to silence and oppress marginalized people. Theologically, imperial uses of messianism increase the significance and power of an already powerful institution. Inter-textually, imperial uses

\(^{312}\) “Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment and quintessence of the prophetic tradition” (Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* 102, emphasis added).

\(^{313}\) See: “The way of [Jesus’] ultimate criticism is his decisive solidarity with marginal people and the accompanying vulnerability required by that solidarity” (Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* 82). And: “The cross is the ultimate metaphor of prophetic criticism because it means the end of the old consciousness that brings death on everyone” (99). See also, “When in the prophetic tradition we come to speak of the ultimate presentation of energy, we finally must turn to Jesus of Nazareth” (102). Later, Brueggemann seems to portray Jesus as the ultimate practitioner of prophetic imagination: “Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet, and more than a prophet, I argue, practiced in most radical form the main elements of prophetic ministry and imagination” (116).
of messianism marginalize, countermand, supersede, or ignore the work and witness of Moses. So then, we might rightly ask of Brueggemann’s “Christ-as-ultimate-fulfillment” approach, or of his “Christ-as-faithful-collaborator” approach, or of any use of messianism:

Who is silenced or marginalized by this use of messianism?  
What institution/figurehead is most likely to gain power and significance from it?  
How does this use of messianism (de)value the prophetic reforms of Moses?

All three of these questions are raised by Brueggemann’s work in The Prophetic Imagination. They are applied in some measure to Solomon, Nebuchadnezzar, and Herod. Unfortunately, they are not overtly engaged in Brueggemann’s assessment of his own approach(es) to messianism.

Still, The Prophetic Imagination sets a helpful paradigm for engaging Brueggemann’s work. It invites reflection upon the economic, political, and theological uses/abuses of power. It also lifts up themes of equality, justice, and divine freedom as inaugurated in the ministry of Moses and exemplified in prophetic traditions. Finally, it highlights three homiletic leitmotifs: (1) the unique voices of scripture as testimonial witness, (2) Deutero-Isaiah as a model for preaching, and (3) the competing roles of divine presence in imperial domination and prophetic resistance. What follows is an examination of Brueggemann’s more homiletically influential books. The study evaluates the ways in which Brueggemann seeks to expand, clarify, correct, minimize or otherwise engage the three homiletical themes from The Prophetic Imagination.
Finally Comes the Poet, 1989

Here Brueggemann focuses on the unique voices of scripture by contrasting the prosaic, technological, language of empire with the lyrical, poetic language of prophet witness. Brueggemann proposes that preachers learn the poetry of prophetic speech.

Far from a reference to a limited sub-genre within the prophetic corpus, poetic-prophetic speech is Brueggemann’s description of the way scripture and scriptural preaching opens up new, surprising, and subversive possibilities:

By poetry I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves like Bob Gibson’s fast ball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace. Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism, the only proclamation, I submit, that is worthy of the name preaching. Such preaching is not moral instruction or problem solving or doctrinal clarification. It is not good advice, nor is it romantic caressing, nor is it a soothing good humor…. The poet/prophet is a voice that shatters settled reality and evokes new possibility in the listening assembly. Preaching continues

314 Based on his Lyman Beecher lectures at Yale, this book addresses what Brueggemann calls “the crisis of interpretation the preacher faces in our culture, which has either dismissed or controlled the text” (Walter Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989)). The problem here is not so much the loss of the preacher’s authority but with the marginalization of the counter cultural good news of scripture. Brueggemann discovers the imprint of the royal imagination in the contemporary preaching moment wherein the gospel is “twisted, pressed, tailored, and gerrymandered until it is comfortable with technological reason that leaves us unbothered, and with ideology that leaves us with uncriticized absolutes” (Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet 2). Technological reason, uncriticized absolutes, and settled formulae are the kinds of “prose” approaches that enable domination, oppression, and the reduction of truth.

315 “By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos” (Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet 3). Note, Brueggemann does not define truth as a philosophical or theological category nor explore it within post-modern connections that one might expect of a text written in 2018 rather than 1989.

316 “To address the issue of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be poets that speak against a prose world” (Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet 3). Brueggemann adds further that poetic speech is “the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age” (3).
that dangerous, indispensable habit of speech. The poetic speech of text and sermon is a prophetic construal of a world beyond the one taken for granted.\footnote{Brueggemann, \textit{Finally Comes the Poet} 3-4.}

Given this definition, it is hardly surprising that Brueggemann finds poet-prophetic speech throughout scripture.\footnote{Brueggemann asserts, “As we seek new modes of speech appropriate to our situation of interpretation, we shall find them, I suggest, exactly in the texts whose modes of speech we have mostly ignored” (\textit{Finally Comes the Poet} ix). While Brueggemann is largely referring to Old Testament texts here, note that his poetic-prophetic category includes the New Testament. As he states, “Broadly construed, the language of the biblical text is prophetic: it anticipates and summons realities that live beyond the conventions of our day-to-day, take-for-granted world” (Brueggemann, \textit{Finally Comes the Poet} 4).} The remainder of his book focuses on various texts as preaching models. He includes reflections on Exodus, Leviticus, Jeremiah, lament psalms, Job, salvation oracles, Daniel, and several other texts as distinct poetic approaches to forgiveness, doxological communion, obedience, and freedom.

With regard to Isaiah,\footnote{Note that Brueggemann also published a (less frequently cited) book called, \textit{Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile} (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). Here he includes two chapters on Second Isaiah’s poetic and prophetic message. He notes that recent scholarship has questioned a hard division between Isa 40-55 and the rest of the book, but that his approach is poetic and thematic rather than historical (91). He highlights exile and homecoming as “imaginative poetry which liberates” (94). He further refers to Second Isaiah as “the supreme example of liberated poetic imagination in the Old Testament” (96), notes that Jesus preaches “like 2 Isaiah” (97), and that the best contemporary examples of such preaching can be found “in the liberated preaching of the black church” especially as exemplified in Martin Luther King, Jr. (97). Finally, Brueggemann analyzes Isaiah 54:1-17 as a sermon that employs poetry and scriptural renarration to address the exiles’ experience of imperialism, amnesia, and despair (130). Interestingly, he compares Second Isaiah’s writing to what Alice Walker says about black writers: they “seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom” (130, citing Alice Walker, \textit{In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens} (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 5).} Brueggemann’s argument is similar to that found in \textit{The Prophetic Imagination}. He focuses a little on Isaiah’s naming of pain/despair. However, his major emphasis is on Second Isaiah, whom he refers to as a preacher energizing for
hope, encouraging resistance, and enacting doxology.\textsuperscript{320} After referencing speeches placed on YHWH’s lips (Isa 42:14-16), Brueggemann presents Isaiah as the preacher who, “does not just tell about God’s faithful presence. The sermon is the moment of proclamation. In the speaking and hearing, slaveries are overcome, exiles are ended, and death is defeated.”\textsuperscript{321} At times Brueggemann reflects on Isaiah’s preaching in ways that sound similar to celebratory forms of preaching within African American traditions.\textsuperscript{322} Unfortunately he does not explore this connection or offer anything more than a passing reference to African American experiences of preaching in the presence of slavery and oppression. Inclusion of this connection could have helped Brueggemann’s overall argument that it is not only (Second) Isaiah’s content, his symbols and re-narration of scripture, but also his sermonic forms, speaking in YHWH’s voice at climactic moments, that are to be studied and emulated by contemporary poet-preachers.

Finally, while including some New Testament analysis,\textsuperscript{323} Brueggemann primarily demonstrates here that the Old Testament is gospel that reveals God and speaks

\begin{footnotes}
\item[320] Brueggemann, \textit{Finally Comes the Poet} 68.
\item[321] Brueggemann, \textit{Finally Comes the Poet} 66.
\item[322] “Preaching is to sound the sounds of pain, protest, and need. In a quick role change, the preacher also sounds the voice of the one who stands in solidarity with a sovereign ‘fear not.’ At the proper moment, but not too soon, the preacher sounds the praise; with the preacher, the whole church breaks out into lyrical praise, because the transformation wrought through this speech is too stunning to permit a logical discourse or sober description” (\textit{Finally Comes the Poet} 76).
\item[323] Here Brueggemann is more consistent in his reference to the continuity between Testaments. Both share a poetic-prophetic mission. For instance, Brueggemann argues that the priestly includes a taxonomy of guilt and healing, and then adds: “The same taxonomy is present in the New Testament” (\textit{Finally Comes the Poet} 33). So too Brueggemann present Christ as working in the same way as or as an echo of Old Testament witnesses. Hence: “The cry of the helpless, if they have a voice, will mobilize God to act…It is the same in the presence of Jesus” (56); and reflecting on Daniel’s treatment of food: “Later, Jesus echoes the crisis of food in the empire” (122).
\end{footnotes}
today. For instance, reflecting on Leviticus and Jeremiah, Brueggemann argues that the preacher finds truth about God: “God notices and is attentive to the deep human quandary…The residue of ache is dealt with by sacramental action that mediates to us God’s own life given toward us.” The challenge then, Brueggeman argues, is not with priestly materials. Rather, the challenge is with contemporary Christian perspectives wherein “these truths are frequently reduced in ways that rob the gospel of its power and urgency.” Again, reflecting on the Psalter and Isaiah, Brueggemann sees testimony that reveals the character of YHWH as “the God who speaks a word of fidelity and assurance, breaking cycles of alienation and rage.” And, finally, Brueggemann commends to preachers the fresh and artistic sounding of the gospel found in Daniel 1 and 4.

Thus, Brueggemann continues the three homiletic themes begun in The Prophetic Imagination. He expands the testimonial and poetic (counter) witness of scripture to include many more Old Testament and New Testament voices. He more clearly portrays Second Isaiah as a preacher, and lifts up his sermonic, celebratory form in addition to his symbols and re-narrations. Finally, Brueggemann describes the Old Testament as good news about God’s character and work for today.

_Cadences of Home, 1997_

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324 Brueggemann, _Finally Comes the Poet_ 32.
325 Brueggemann, _Finally Comes the Poet_ 32.
326 Brueggemann, _Finally Comes the Poet_ 111.
327 “Because of the reductions that render the gospel empty and innocuous, the preacher must speak against reductions to permit a fresh hearing. The fresh hearing must be in new, artistic forms, so that the speaking and the hearing are done with fresh imagination, with new power, and with authorizing energy that takes us by surprise…These two narratives in Daniel 1 and Daniel 4 model what must be artistically offered by the preacher” (Brueggemann, _Finally Comes the Poet_ 138).
328 This book is a collection of three new chapters combined with five articles that Brueggemann wrote from 1989 to 1995. Here Brueggemann is more explicit than before.
Here again, Brueggemann highlights numerous texts to present the Old Testament as a polyphonic collection of testimony. In fact, Brueggemann suggests that contemporary preachers should learn from the Old Testament this testimonial mode of preaching as a way to counter white, male colonialism. Somewhat problematically, however, Brueggemann amplifies the U.S. church’s connection to exile by minimizing the experience of physical suffering and maximizing a typological reading of scripture that risks psychologizing and spiritualizing the exile. Still, Brueggemann’s

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that the Old Testament is a word that speaks today. Specifically, Brueggemann argues, “the Old Testament experience of and reflection upon exile is a helpful metaphor for understanding our current faith situation in the U.S. church, and a model for pondering new forms of ecclesiology” (Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1). Sounding notes similar to what Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon would publish as *Resident Aliens*, Brueggemann argues that the church is socially and culturally displaced in the United States—a status that it should embrace as a prophetic alternative to the culture around it (Brueggemann, *Cadences* 15). (Brueggemann is quick to defend Hauerwas and Willimon from the charge of ‘sectarian withdrawal’ (*Cadences* 13)).

Brueggemann, *Cadences* 38.

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The points of connection that Brueggemann enumerates between exiles in the Old Testament and the experience of the U.S. church do not seem to include much reference to the actual experience of suffering imposed on Israelite bodies in the Babylonian exile. There is little reckoning with violence, death, loss of property, destruction, geographical displacement, or systemic oppression. Instead, Brueggemann connects exiles and the U.S. church by focusing upon: 1. “Exiles must grieve their loss and express their resentful sadness about what was and now is not and will never again be” (*Cadences* 4, emphasis added). 2. “Exile is an act of being orphaned, and many folks now sense themselves in that status” (5, emphasis added). 3. “The most obvious reality and greatest threat to exiles is the power of despair” (6). 4. “Exile is an experience of profaned absence [of God]” (7). 5. “Exile is an experience of moral incongruity” (9). 6. “The danger in exile is to become so preoccupied with self that one cannot get outside one’s self to rethink, reimagine, and redescribed larger reality” (10).

331 “Exile, that is social, cultural displacement, is not primarily geographical but liturgical and symbolic” (*Cadences* 15). In these chapters Brueggemann rarely points to individuals or communities who have experienced physical suffering, discrimination, or systemic oppression in the U.S. Neither does Brueggemann offer a clear call to advocate for or live in community with these individuals and communities.

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testimonial mode can create space for difference,\textsuperscript{332} focus on YHWH’s character in the world,\textsuperscript{333} and engage poetic devices to open new futures.\textsuperscript{334} While \textit{Cadences of Home} does not feature the depth and breadth of reflection on poetic testimony that is in \textit{Finally Comes the Poet}, Brueggemann nevertheless points his reader to the ways in which the Old Testament engages in artistic articulations that open up new possibilities for ancient Israel and for contemporary congregations.\textsuperscript{335}

Here too Breuggemann features Second Isaiah prominently. While he again points to “the defiant doxology of Isaiah,”\textsuperscript{336} to his preaching of old texts,\textsuperscript{337} and to his use of song,\textsuperscript{338} Brueggemann’s most significant expansion is his argument about how Second Isaiah engages testimony. Here he claims that Isaiah demonstrates two practices of testimony: (1) testimony to Israel and (2) the invitation for Israel to witness to Yahweh’s presence and power.\textsuperscript{339} Brueggemann looks specifically at Isa 40:9-10 to illustrate his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{332}“Whereas the empire needs certitude, exiles need space” (\textit{Cadences} 42).
\item \textsuperscript{333}“Proclamation to exiles must be intensely Yahweh-focused, that is, preoccupied with the character of Yahweh as a credible, normal, and indispensable character in the world” (\textit{Cadences} 42).
\item \textsuperscript{334}Proclamation to exiles “requires a scripting of reality that is not subordinated to the rationality of empire,” but instead uses hyperbole, irony, contradiction, and deliberate ambiguity (\textit{Cadences} 43-44).
\item \textsuperscript{335}In a few places, Brueggemann stumbles with this argument. For instance, he seems to confuse prose/royal and poetic/prophetic categories in arguing that scripture’s goal is to persuade: “I think it is a major gain to see that the Bible in its several models is an artistic, rhetorical proposal of reality that seeks to persuade (convert) to an alternative sense of God, world, neighbor, and self” (\textit{Cadences} 12).
\item \textsuperscript{336}Brueggemann, \textit{Cadences} 21.
\item \textsuperscript{337}“Isaiah 52:7, the key text of gospel testimony, centers in the assertion, ‘Your God reigns.’” Likely lifted from an older liturgical text (Ps 96:10) where Israel sings, Say among the nations, ‘Your God reigns.’” 49
\item \textsuperscript{338}Brueggemann concludes a section of reflection of Second Isaiah with the observation: “Hymns are sung when situations of great trouble are transformed by the power and mercy of God” (\textit{Cadences} 20).
\item \textsuperscript{339}Brueggemann, \textit{Cadences} 46-7.
\end{itemize}
point. These verses bear witness to the good news of the presence of God in the midst of exile: “Behold your God.” At the same time, they call for others to testify by speaking in YHWH’s voice: “you are my witnesses.” From these and similar observations, Brueggemann asserts that Second Isaiah models a way of preaching that fosters conversation about the presence of YHWH in (even) the exilic world. This conversation is meant to foster an alternative community based on “recovery of memory and rootage and connectedness,” the “intense practice of hope,” and a strong focus on scriptural texts. At the same time, Isaiah’s exilic preaching includes the presence and voices of foreigners/outsiders as an implicit recognition of and summons to those who “overhear” Israel’s testimony: Come, hear the good news: YHWH who created you, cares intensely for you, and has made a place of belonging for you in God’s alternative community.

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340 Reflecting on Isa 40:9, Brueggemann asserts that the prophet-preacher offers “a piece of poetry, not history, not doctrine, not ontology” (Cadences 46). This poetry heralds the gospel which is” ‘Behold your God’”(46).

341 Looking specifically at Isa 43:10, “you are my witnesses,” Brueggemann find a call to a type of testimony that is “an alternative counter version of reality” because it is guided by Yahweh’s instruction (48).

342 Brueggemann, Cadences 105. Looking to Isaiah and a few other texts, Brueggemann also argues that preaching to exilic situations should call forth dangerous memories, dangerous criticism, dangerous promises, dangerous songs, dangerous bread, dangerous departures (Cadences 134).

343 Brueggemann, Cadences 95.

344 c.f. Isa 43:1-2. Brueggemann, Cadences 134. Unfortunately, Brueggemann implies that the white, protestant, church is Israel and secular Americans are outsiders. This is a missed opportunity flip-the-script and call those Christians in power because of their race and gender to “overhear” the testimony of those who have experienced discrimination and systemic oppression (something a little closer to exile?) and, perhaps, join their lives and voices with them in forming an alternative community.
The Old Testament’s work in preaching good news gets special attention in *Cadences of Home*. Brueggemann devotes an entire chapter—and 16 theses!—to the subject, which he calls evangelical preaching. Not all of his theses need to be explored here. It should be noted, however, that Brueggemann does not see gospel preaching coming from the “old modes” of the church’s preaching or from the “modes of absolutism” that historical-criticism has become. He does not reject these approaches outright, but highlights the ways in which both modes can fuel domination. In contrast, he lifts up modes that he finds in the Old Testament—a playful type of artisanship that is aware of the text’s polyvalence and offers an open-ended proclamation. Again, Brueggemann underscores the importance in the Old Testament of imagination and poetry. But, here he draws out these homiletic aspects as applied to texts’ narration of the presence of God: “The preaching of these texts is not an offer of metaphysics but the enactment of a drama in which the congregation is audience but may at any moment become participant…its quintessential mode is narrative, the telling of story, and the subsequent living of that story.” The Old Testament’s preaching of the gospel, then,

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345 Elsewhere Brueggemann makes clear that his use of the term “evangelical” is “as an adjectival form of ‘gospel,’ whose basis is the network of signs and gestures from the ‘text of the Bible’” (Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 26-7).

346 Brueggemann writes, “the old modes of church absolutes are no longer trusted…Those at the margins of dominating knowledge will no longer permit the practitioners of dominating power to be supervisors of absolute knowledge” (*Cadences* 24). He adds further: “historical criticism has become, in scripture study, a version of ‘modes of absolutism’ among the elatedly educated” (Ibid. 24).

347 Ibid. *Cadences* 25.

348 Ibid. 33.
“invites the listener out of his or her assumed context into many alternative contexts.”

It asks the listener to “enter a different script that imaginatively tells one’s life differently.”

Thus, in *Cadences of Home* Brueggemann continues the three homiletical themes from *The Prophetic Imagination*. Though he focuses less upon enumerating the unique testimonial voices of scripture here, he reflects more broadly on the importance of a polyvalent testimonial model as that which creates space for difference in articulating YHWH’s character in the world. Second Isaiah’s preaching enacts a testimonial mode of preaching that points to YHWH’s presence and invites lived and spoken testimonies from his (over)hearers. Finally, more than in the works reviewed above, Brueggemann questions whether the old modes of the church or the current modes of historical-criticism are adequate for preaching good news. Both participate, he argues, in a dominating absolutism that runs counter to the narrative of God’s liberating, inclusive, justice seeking presence in the world.

*Theology of the Old Testament, 1997*  
This book is less explicitly focused upon homiletics—and though well known, perhaps less read by pastors. As such, it will not receive a full review. Nevertheless, it

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349 Brueggemann, *Cadences* 35. This is one of the few places where Brueggemann reflects on his own position and privilege, noting that he lives in a suburb “in which I hear of the poor but on most days do not see them” (36). Unfortunately, Brueggemann does not use this observation to call himself or others into contemporary contexts of poverty, violence, or oppression. Rather he instructs the reader to imagine some of the biblical text’s contexts.

350 Brueggemann, *Cadences* 35.


merits attention because it presents an Old Testament theology relevant to our homiletic conversation. For instance, with regard to valuing the unique voices of the Old Testament, Brueggemann presents the metaphor of the Old Testament as a courtroom trial filled with core testimony and counter testimony (cross examination). Here Brueggemann argues that core testimony features YHWH’s sovereign power and solidarity with the needy.\footnote{Brueggemann, \textit{Theology} 144.} This emphasis on God’s righteous power and care appears frequently and in various forms throughout the Old Testament. Brueggemann calls it “perhaps the largest, most comprehensive category for Old Testament theology.”\footnote{Brueggemann, \textit{Theology} 303.}

Perhaps not surprisingly, Brueggemann lifts up Second Isaiah as one of the prime examples of core testimony. “In Isa 45:21-25 we have a vigorous doxology celebrating Yahweh’s righteousness, which has as its negative counterpart the dismissal of rival (Babylonian) gods who have no power.”\footnote{Brueggemann, \textit{Theology} 305.} Here the poet-prophet references YHWH’s righteousness four times: YHWH is a “righteous God and savior,” righteousness goes forth from YHWH’s mouth; only in YHWH can one be said to show “righteousness and strength;” and in YHWH all Israel shall find righteousness/triumph. These references, Brueggemann asserts, are a poetic effort to highlight “Yahweh’s massive authority,

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capacity, and readiness to do right.”

Again, Second Isaiah is at the core of Brueggemann’s understating of Old Testament theology and preaching.

Second Isaiah’s poetic work presents good news—a gospel of God’s love and God’s power. Here Brueggemann notes that love and power are often in tension within scripture. And, he notes that many Christians claim that such a tension is resolved in the cross, where “God’s own life embraces the abandonment of broken covenant.”

However, Brueggemann finds such a claim dubious—even dangerous in light of the Shoah. Christian theology, he claims, requires the sounding of both Good Friday and Easter Sunday—hence a tension. And, the Old Testament, while maintaining tension between the two, clearly favors God’s fidelity.

Thus, Brueggemann concludes: “I do not imagine Christians know a lot more or much that is different from what these candid witnesses in Israel knew.”

Thus with just his examination of core testimony, Brueggemann offers important insights into the testimonial function of Old Testament voices, the good news.

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356 Brueggemann, Theology 306.
357 Brueggemann, Theology 311.
358 Brueggemann, Theology 312.
359 Brueggemann, Theology 312.
360 In an equally important development, Anna Carter Florence presents Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology as a viable homiletic of testimony. Here she views testimony not as perception but report (Anna Carter Florence, Preaching as Testimony (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 62). As such, it assumes a dispute between at least two opinions, looks for a just decision, and seeks to persuade through the use of rhetoric (62). With the example of the prophet, Isaiah, we see that—as a witness—he is sent to testify to “the radical, global meaning” of God. His speech is a “proclamation for all people”; it “calls for a total engagement of words and acts” (63). What this example shows, says Carter Florence, is that “testimony gives something to be interpreted and, at the same time, calls for an interpretation” (63).

Preaching as testimony, then, offers “claim and confession rather than absolute and certitude” (65). It responds to an encounter with the divine, but does not close off

*The Practice of Prophetic Imagination, 2012*361

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further conversation. Interpreting Brueggemann’s Theology of the Old Testament, Carter Florence reports that Israel’s witness in the Old Testament is marked by a lack of resolution. This, she says, is because “Israel does not defend God; Israel describes God. The Old Testament pattern of testimony will always favor honesty above closure, denial, and cover up” (72). In fact, Carter Florence claims that within the Old Testament no witness has the last word. “Core testimony and counter testimony belong together, in a continuing, mutual exchange, as a way of being faithful in the world” (72). In this way the Old Testament models a testimonial conversation—perhaps even what one might call a courtroom debate.

However, this is the type of hearing that seeks to sound good news. Carter Florence asserts that the Old Testament can teach us four things about testimony: (1) God will encounter us, (2) No one should expect impartiality when talking about God, (3) Partnership and covenant compel testimony, and (4) Our talk will expose us, making us vulnerable to debate and even rejection (79).

361 Here Brueggemann focuses upon the contemporary “preacher-scribe” as the handler of the prophetic tradition (Walter Brueggemann, The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 2). As with his previous works on prophetic preaching, Brueggemann argues that the major objective of prophetic preaching is to present a contest of two imaginations (royal and prophetic) in a way that opens up the possibility for hearers to see that YHWH is “a real character and an effective agent in the world” (*Practice* 2). Brueggemann states his “guiding thesis: prophetic proclamation is an attempt to imagine the word as though YHWH—the creator of the world, the deliverer of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we Christians come to name as Father, Son, and Spirit—were a real character and an effective agent in the world” (*Practice* 2). A second thesis is built off the first: “prophetic proclamation is the staging and performance of a contest between two narrative accounts of the world and an effort to show that the YHWH account of reality is more adequate and finally more reliable than the dominant narrative account that is cast among us as though it were beyond critique” (*Practice* 3, emphasis added). Brueggemann’s use of “show” is interesting here. At times he has presented prophetic preaching as an attempt to persuade or convince—and “contest” in the above quote also implies that meaning here. At other times Brueggemann has focused on prophetic demonstration, enactment, and poetic possibility—an understanding implied by “staging and performing.” This creates a bit of a conundrum: poetry is rarely thought of as a persuasive mode of speech (excepting Davis’ claims). If Brueggemann intends to say that prophetic proclamation is both persuasive and poetic, he has not clarified this position anywhere that I have read. This is narrative work that requires creativity. As Brueggemann asserts, “the ancient prophets are in fact *imagers*; and those of us who follow in their wake are *imagers* after them” (*Practice* 24). Such work frequently employs “poetic cadences…to evoke, to shock, to
In this work, Brueggemann’s definition of the category of prophetic speech gets a little nebulous. It is narrative. It is poetry. It is contest. It is playful possibility. It is woe oracle.\(^{362}\) It is speech comparing YHWH to a grieving mother.\(^{363}\) It pushes forth God’s future. It calls for waiting.\(^{364}\) Part of the challenge is that Brueggemann’s approach sounds more thematic than textual. While he still engages texts like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah as examples, Brueggemann seems more focused here on mashing up scriptural texts to describe the experience of loss and its relation to divine judgment, to wrestle with grief and relinquishment, and to narrate the waiting/anticipating dance of God’s in-breaking action. What gets lost in this thematic approach is precisely what Brueggemann has valued in earlier works—the unique and distinct voices of testimony within the Old Testament.

tease, to play, to probe, not with certitude but with possibility for what has been, until now, unthinkable and unsayable” (Practice 25). Brueggemann adds here: “our attempts to replicate prophetic utterance in our historical-critical, ‘objective’ way will never echo what is given in these utterances” (Practice 25). And he writes further in a way that evokes some forms of Christian theology: “The claim of dominant imagination…is a totalizing claim that does not permit any reality or any claim outside of its regime and certainly does not welcome any rival claim” (Practice 27).

\(^{362}\) Here Brueggemann wrestles with Moral explanation for loss, which he ties to divine judgment. One of the ways he sees prophets addressing this subject is through woe oracles, which he claims are less about judgment and more about grief. They offer a “word of sadness appropriate to death or other deep loss” (Practice 57).

\(^{363}\) Here Brueggemann cites Isa 49:15-18 as a way to touch on the theme of naming and navigating loss. To this end, he argues that Isa 49 portrays (1) YHWH “as reduced to deep grief”; (2) “YHWH breaks the silence”; (3) YHWH’s new resolve is “a fresh commitment to compassion” (Practice 93-4).

\(^{364}\) Newness and Waiting is another theme that Brueggemann addresses in this book. He writes, “very much of our ‘prophetic preaching’ is defined by and limited to urgent social action pleading. It cannot be emphasized too strongly, in my judgment, that prophetic preaching is the enactment of hope in contexts of loss and grief. It is the declaration that God can enact a novum in our very midst, even when we judge that to be impossible” (Practice 110).
Even Brueggemann’s work on Isaiah is muted here. It is not that he doesn’t engage numerous Isaianic texts. It is, rather, that he paints Isaiah with a broader brush than in his earlier writings. For instance, even though he points to several examples of lament in Second Isaiah, Brueggemann opines in the next chapter: “the entire corpus of Isaiah 40-55 intends to announce and enact a new wave of the future given by YHWH that will lead to a jubilant return to Jerusalem.” And later he seems to make a broad assessment of Second Isaiah’s literary genre: “the poetry of Isaiah…is all utterance. It is all imagination.” The problem here is not with jubilant return, utterance, or imagination in Second Isaiah. The problem is that words like “entire” and “all” do not do justice to the variegated and polyvalent nature of the types of speech encountered in Isaiah and described in Brueggemann’s earlier work.

Equally curious is the way in which Brueggemann engages the presence of God and the good news. Initially, Brueggemann names prophetic witness as good news. He frames it in ways similar to what he wrote in earlier works: the practice of prophetic imagination is the contest between “gospel narrative” and “military consumerism.” This prophetic gospel message is transformative. But then, just a few pages later,

365 Brueggemann, *Practice* 122.
367 Brueggemann, *Practice* 3.
368 Brueggemann describes the tasks of contemporary prophetic ministry as (1) “to empower and enable folk to relinquish a world that is passing from us” (*Practice* 136); (2) “to enable and empower folk to receive a new world that is emerging before our very eyes that we confess to be a gift of God” (138); (3) “Prophetic preaching is situated in the midst of: Relinquishment and denial, Reception and despair” (143); (4) “The pastoral-prophetic task is deeply beneath specific issues; it concerns a substructure of a ‘felt world’ that is variously known as threat or opportunity, as gift or wound” (143); and (5) “What the biblical tradition knows, however, is that true speech has transformative power and is not finally silenced” (143).
Brueggemann seeks to paint the prophetic good news about God in a much broader light. He connects the prophetic narrative to what he calls, Israel’s “credo;” this he correlates to the New Testament message about Christ.\textsuperscript{369} Both of these messages, argues Brueggemann, present the same story as that in the Nicene and Apostles’s Creed.\textsuperscript{370} And, all of these statements are reflected in the Jewish statement from Franz Rosenzweig: “Creation-Revelation-Redemption.”\textsuperscript{372} Reflecting on this gospel mash-up, Brueggemann asserts, “These several tellings of ‘the old, old story’ of course yield different accents. They are, however, agreed that YHWH (in Christian confession, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ) is the deciding character and key agent in the historical-cosmos process.”\textsuperscript{373} Such a move with regard to articulating the good news of God’s presence sends a mixed message—especially in light of Brueggemann’s earlier work. Positively, one might say that Brueggemann seeks here to show that the good news of prophetic witness is of the same nature, salvific intention, and delivering power as anything articulated earlier or later in scripture or formulated in (Jewish and Christian) creedal forms. Problematically, such a framing of good news minimizes the differences between Judaism and Christianity in a way that risks stripping both religious traditions of their particular identities, practices, and proclamations. This move also mutes the unique testimonial witnesses

\textsuperscript{369} Brueggemann understands Israel’s “credo” as “promise to the ancestors, the Exodus deliverance, and the entry into the land of promise, all accomplished by the powerful fidelity of YHWH” (\textit{Practice 5}).
\textsuperscript{370} Brueggemann argues that the New Testament counterpoint to the prophetic narrative are the facts of the death and resurrection in Christ. “Here the narrative revolves around Christ, but clearly it assumes that action of the God of Israel who is the God of the church” (\textit{Practice 5}).
\textsuperscript{371} Brueggemann, \textit{Practice 5}.
\textsuperscript{372} Ibid. 5.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid. 5.
contained within the Old (and New!) Testaments. These religious perspectives and
textual witnesses do more than sound “different accents.” From the perspective of
Brueggemann’s earlier writings, one might say instead that these texts and religious
traditions present a life-giving conversation, a retinue of resistance to the royal-
imagination, a delivering debate filled with testimony and counter-testimony.

*The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* offers a disappointing coda to the work
that Brueggemann began nearly 40 years earlier. It is more thematic than textual. It
flattens Second Isaiah’s prophetic and homiletic witness. And, it unhelpfully broadens the
good news of God in a way that minimizes (and perhaps oppresses374) the particular
character and perspective of each voice. In these ways, this book is a lost opportunity to
guide and inspire contemporary Christian preachers for preaching the Old Testament.

This is not to say that Brueggemann’s larger corpus does not guide and inspire
preachers in helpful ways. The paradigm that Brueggemann established in *The Prophetic
Imagination* highlights the intersection of preaching with political, economic, and
theological power. The royal imagination—what Brueggemann has more recently (and
less poetically) referred to as “totalism”375—manipulates these three areas especially in
order to increase domination and oppression. Conversely, the prophetic imagination—

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374 We might ask of Brueggemann’s thoughts on gospel here the same questions based on
Solomon’s use of messianism: Who is silenced or marginalized by this use of
messianism? What institution or figurehead is most likely to gain power and significance
from it? How does this use of messianism (de)value the prophetic reforms of Moses?
375 In the 40th Anniversary edition of *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann states
that he has been influenced recently by Robert Lifton, who writes about the totalizing
claims of regimes. Brueggemann prefers this language over “royal imagination” because
it because it can be applied more broadly (*Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic
Brueggemann’s description of the creative witness of prophetic literature—seeks to unmask, lament, and energize resistance to the royal imagination. This way of preaching is what Brueggemann commends to contemporary preachers, highlighting three important homiletic accents:

First, Brueggemann helpfully focuses on the testimonial witness of scripture. His work blows up the false dualism of New Testament versus Old Testament preaching. As Brueggemann shows, there are far too many voices and perspectives—oftentimes even within one biblical book—to reduce the conversation to a simple “either-or.” Here Brueggemann emphasizes the unique voices of scripture as testimonial witnesses to the prophetic imagination that engage other voices and need to be heard in their own right. Even the witnesses’ own words often hold a polyvalent meaning. This open-ended, poetic movement within the Old Testament between testimony, counter testimony, advocacy, and evaluation move is a viable homiletic model, as Anna Carter Florence has shown. In this way, the prophetic imagination describes not merely a way to preach the Old Testament. It is an Old Testament homiletic for preaching any scriptural text and for resisting political, economic, and theological domination in the world today.

Second, Brueggemann consistently highlights Second Isaiah as not only a prophetic witness, but a preacher and a model for preaching. This prophetic voice models imagination through poetry, metaphor, symbols, and song. Second Isaiah demonstrates how the preacher might engage in a re-narration of the “old story” of scripture to speak into new situations and to address audiences that might initially believe the old scripture to be less relevant to their experience. Brueggemann also highlights how Second Isaiah models preaching forms such as celebration and testimonial modes that invite and
empower testimony from his hearers. Finally, Brueggemann argues that the preaching of Second Isaiah participates in core testimony about the good news of God’s power and love.

Third, with regard to good news, Brueggemann helpfully questions the roots and highlights the likely use of messianism within the royal imagination. Messianism, despite its potentially positive uses, can be used by the royal imagination as a theological tool for strengthening the power and prestige of one already in power. Such messianism is easily co-opted for dominating purposes, as Brueggemann argues is the case with Solomon’s reforms. Furthermore, Brueggemann’s wrestling with the connections between the presence of God in the Old Testament and New Testament highlights interpretive issues pertaining to the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. This wrestling is connected to royal (and prophetic) understandings of messianism. Stated plainly, a Christian version of the royal imagination is one that uses Jesus as a uniquely immanent messiah to marginalize the Old Testament and Jewish interpretation of it. Conversely, a prophetic analysis of messiah would ask of any messianic move: who benefits and who is marginalized by this use of messiah? These questions, and Brueggemann’s work as a whole, demand that any true articulation of the good news of God’s presence and work will feature justice and mercy prominently.

In all these ways Brueggemann’s work is helpful for contemporary preaching of all scripture, including the Old Testament.

Still, his work does present some challenges that might best be engaged through a few of Brueggemann’s observations about his own work:
In the preface to the first edition of *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann makes a point of stating that this book is “offered in thanksgiving” for the prophetic work of women in ordained ministry and in the academy.\textsuperscript{376} What he shares here is more than gratitude. He writes, “I am growingly aware that this book is different because of the emerging feminine consciousness as it impacts our best theological thinking.”\textsuperscript{377} He later adds, “In many ways these sisters have permitted me to see what I might otherwise have missed.”\textsuperscript{378} Again, in the “Preface to the Second Edition” of *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann reiterates the impact of “sisters in ministry” on his writing, while also highlighting a reference to José Porfirio Miranda as indication of his burgeoning attention to and learning from liberation theology in the late 1970’s.\textsuperscript{379} and yet, he hardly engages any women or Latinx preachers, exegetes, or theologians.

In *Theology of the Old Testament*, Brueggemann laments that in the 16th and 17th centuries Christian scholarship was “increasingly cut off from Jewish conversation partners.”\textsuperscript{380} This isolation from Jewish conversation, he argues, contributed directly to works like that of Julius Wellhausen’s, which Brueggemann says “was inherently biased against Jewishness.”\textsuperscript{381} And yet, outside of a few consistent references to

\textsuperscript{376} “Preface to the First Edition” xxiv in second edition.
\textsuperscript{377} xxiv in second edition.
\textsuperscript{378} xxiv in second edition.
\textsuperscript{379} xi Second Edition.
\textsuperscript{380} Brueggemann, *Theology* 108.
\textsuperscript{381} Brueggemann, *Theology* 108.
Abraham Heschel, Brueggemann rarely engages with Jewish interpretation and proclamation.

In *Finally Comes the Poet*, Brueggemann reflects on Isaiah’s preaching in ways that sound similar to forms of preaching within African American traditions.\(^{382}\) And, in Hopeful Imagination Brueggemann acknowledges that the kind of hopeful energizing for resistance he sees in Isaiah is modeled in Martin Luther King, Jr. And yet, Brueggemann does not explore this connection or offer anything more than a passing reference to African American homiletics or hermeneutics.

In the new material written in Advent 2017 for Fortieth Anniversary Edition of *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann identifies Donald Trump as a point person for totalism/royal imagination. As a response, Brueggemann calls for a prophetic imagination that moves the church from charity to justice, fosters a systematic awareness of ways to ‘follow the money,’ shows how righteousness, justice and faithfulness are central to the common life, and points to a theology of the cross that contradicts theologies of glory.\(^{383}\) These are all great suggestions, and yet, they are all also largely limited to exegetical and theological considerations. There is no overt

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\(^{382}\) “Preaching is to sound the sounds of pain, protest, and need. In a quick role change, the preacher also sounds the voice of the one who stands in solidarity with a sovereign ‘fear not.’ At the proper moment, but not too soon, the preacher sounds the praise; with the preacher, the whole church breaks out into lyrical praise, because the transformation wrought through this speech is too stunning to permit a logical discourse or sober description” (*Finally Comes the Poet* 76).

call for the preacher to leave the study in order to listen to or engage with oppressed people and/or marginalized perspectives.

Taken together, these examples raise questions not only about important conversation partners neglected in Brueggemann’s homiletical work. They raise questions about the economic, political, theological, and cultural dynamics of domination at work in even Brueggemann’s approach to prophetic preaching.

Said another way, how can anyone fully recognize—much less critique—the dominating royal imagination without (at least) actively engaging the perspectives of women, Latinx, Jewish, and African American scholars? We might ask further:

Who gets to decide what messianism, or which types of inter-testamental readings, participate in the domination of the royal imagination?

How is good news recognized? Where does one locate it? And, how does this news correlate with statements of good news from other locations and religious experiences?

What counts as core testimony? Is frequency of the message the criteria, or would it be better to examine the way “core” messages impact marginalized peoples?

Why would one think that contemporary U.S. audiences would most connect with the internalized, psycho-spiritual experience of exile rather than with the most basic experience of loss, oppression, and bodily harm?

These questions are not an attempt to diminish Brueggemann’s valuable insights for preaching the Old Testament. Rather, such questions suggest that Brueggeman’s work has not yet gone far enough in identifying, critiquing, and energizing resistance to the

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384 Note that Brueggemann does discuss this question—if unsatisfactorily—in *Theology of the Old Testament*, in the sections: “Normative Shape/Substance of Israel’s Utterance.”
royal imagination. How can anyone fully respond to these and similar questions without being in close contact with those who are marginalized in our own world?

2.7. Concluding Reflections

This study of key scholars from the last several decades has shown several important insights into the way a Christian preacher might perceive and preach the Old Testament. Briefly stated, Elizabeth Achtemeier asserts that the Old Testament took its shape as the result of preaching, which not only interpreted earlier texts but reframed them in light the preacher’s present circumstances. Walter Kaiser, Jr., calls preachers to value the Old Testament’s unique theological and ethical contributions. He also advocates for discerning the author’s intention and meaning within historical context. John Holbert applies the inductive/narrative approach to Old Testament texts, demonstrating that Old Testament narratives can be especially well suited to invite and initiate hearers into God’s strange and transformative ways in the world today. Ellen Davis guides preachers toward a distinct way of proclaiming the Old Testament, focusing on the intersection of liturgy, scriptural language, and poetics in preaching. Rein Bos draws attention to anti-semitism and power dynamics that have affected traditional Christian interpretation and points to some ways in which Jews and Christians share in celebration and anticipation of God’s fulfillment of scriptural promises.

At the same time, this study has also shown that many of these approaches contain problematic elements. Promise-fulfillment models can participate in genre confusion and supersessionist construals of scripture (Achtemeier). Despite calls for historical and textual study, Christian hermeneutics can employ Christ as a sort of *deus ex machina* that solves the text (Kaiser, Jr.). Both a wide-lens focus on theological themes as
well as a strict narrative/inductive homiletic can marginalize the importance of the particularity, detail, and non-narrative theology of the Old Testament (Holbert). While one might be tempted to let the Old Testament speak in its own voice, the text is always interpreted through a located hermeneutic whose power is better managed by clearly stating one’s hermeneutical method (Davis). Despite one’s intention, adapting traditional Christian hermeneutics without engaging Jewish perspectives risks simply repeating traditional anti-Jewish bias (Bos). Connecting the suffering of Old Testament contexts to modern, North American contexts requires one to engage more intentionally the insights of marginalized people then and now (Brueggemann).

Furthermore, in some cases this study of the Old Testament has shown places where scholars treat the Old Testament as a problem that needs to be solved. Achtemeier indicates that the Old Testament doesn’t contain enough hopeful (promissory) material. Kaiser seems to say that the Old Testament’s history and language doesn’t say “Jesus” clearly enough. Holbert implies that the Old Testament could be preachable if one applied the right method to the Old Testament’s more approachable, narrative sections. Bos holds that the Old Testament cannot be fully understood without the application of an intricate 4-fold heuristic.

Thus, the scholars studied here paint a complicated picture. Their approaches offer insights for developing a promising Old Testament homiletic. Yet they include problematic hermeneutic elements. Many treat the Old Testament itself as a problem. In all, what this study shows is that there remain more pressing issues preventing the Christian proclamation of the Old Testament than ignorance about Old Testament content. Preachers need more than a set of theological keys or a homiletic manual for
applying method to Old Testament texts. While it is a good start simply to let the words of the Old Testament text be heard in preaching, we cannot do so without regard for our social, racial, economic, and cultural location. Nor will a repurposed traditional hermeneutic suffice. Such approaches do not fully engage the deeper problems that often affect the way in which the Old Testament is perceived, especially in European-American churches marked by Marcion’s fingerprints.

What is needed, then, is something more than a few helpful suggestions for preaching. Homileticians have gotten ahead of ourselves with attention to these matters. What is needed is reflection on simple, but deep, questions such as: Who is the God we proclaim? What is the good news and where can it be found? And, How should

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385 Navigating conceptions of race as applied to scripture is thorny. For instance, Allen and Holbert’s work asserts that the Old Testament has significant concern for the nations, i.e. a universal interest. While some might debate this claim, my concern is that in the argument for “the universal interest of the Old Testament” we not strip the Old Testament authors of their own ethnicity and culture. An example of this can be seen in Martin Brokenleg’s article about Native American preaching. He asserts: “Reading the old ways of the Jewish people is instructive for us Lakota, but it cannot become our way of life. We use the Hebrew Scriptures to gain additional insight into the nature of the one God with whom both Jewish and Lakota people have a long-term relationship. These understandings frequently come from having very similar experiences and stories. The Lakol Wicoh’an is the Lakota way of life and the basis of our hearing of Jesus and Jesus’ teachings” (“A Native American Perspective: ‘That the People May Live’ 26-42 in Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives Christine Smith, ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998, 34, emphasis added). Notice here how Brokenleg replaces the Old Testament with his own culture’s tradition. The Old Testament is the old Jewish way that is helpful—and in many ways similar to his own culture—but is decidedly not the basis for life or for understanding Jesus. I suggest that this move has as much—if not more—to do with Brokenleg’s Western (Anglican) theological heritage than with Lakota tradition. Thus, his approach points to a broader issue in Western Christianity’s treatment of the Old Testament that we see in German Lutheran, British Anglican, and Anglo-American Methodist/Baptist traditions. See also treatments of the Old Testament from the antebellum South through the Civil Rights era in Albert J. Raboteau’s Slave Religion, Cleophus LaRue’s The Heart of Black Preaching, and Allan Callahan’s The Talking Book.
Christians connect and interact with the text of a people who, because of anti-semitism, have been labeled and persecuted as a religious and ethnic minority? In short, how do we perceive the Old Testament in relation to the life of faith?

It is here that Walter Brueggemann points us in the right direction. As his work shows, the Old Testament is not the problem, rather the Old Testament confronts the problem. It addresses imaginations and systems that seek to exploit, dominate, and silence those who are not already in power. Here Brueggemann helpfully calls attention to the distinct testimonial witnesses of scripture that name, lament, denounce, and energize resistance to the royal imagination. Here Brueggemann shows that even our most cherished theologies and religious institutions can become tools of domination. Specifically, he rightly questions the roots of and highlights the most likely use for messianism within a royal imagination. Here too, Brueggemann helpfully and consistently highlights Second Isaiah as a prophetic witness, as a preacher, and as a model for preaching.

So, following Brueggemann’s example—and responding to the lack of conversation in his homiletic works with contemporary women, Latinx, Jewish, and African American scholars—we will turn in the next chapter to exploring the deeper issues of political, economic, theological, and cultural domination by looking at the servant songs in Second Isaiah. These songs—neglected in Brueggemann’s homiletic work yet consistently (ab)used in Christian preaching—present a distinct homiletic response to contexts of marginalization that will illustrate further the deeper problem of exploitation, silencing, and domination.
3: The Suffering Servant, Preaching, and Domination

I posit that the internal violence experienced by so many people—women, men, and children—is aided and abetted by the biblical hermeneutics dominantly practiced in the United States. Mainstream Bible scholarship does not make connections to internal US-American violence; it is silent about it, sometimes even endorsing it. In fact, it is grounded in exegetical methods and reading strategies that distance biblical meanings from the various forms of violence plaguing the country, be it poverty, the death penalty, police brutality, or sexual violence. The resulting complicity with violence within US-American society instructs the public that the Bible, correctly read, is removed from the hurt, suffering, and pain in people’s lives.¹

The world needs a different way of reading the Bible—this is Susanne Scholz’s argument in “How to Read the Bible in the Belly of the Beast.” Too often our hermeneutics ignore the biblical text’s connection to contemporary suffering. Consider interpretation of the Servant Songs. Here, commentators explore the suffering of an individual or group of exiles, but this is usually limited to an historical enterprise relegated to Babylonian and Persian periods of domination. And, when the Songs are read with an eye to what they might say about suffering beyond the Persian period, they are most frequently subsumed in reflections on the suffering of Jesus. The problem here is not with historical examination and theological reflection, per se. The problem is that such endeavors have not enabled the church to think critically and speak clearly about the suffering of people in the contemporary world. Indeed, too frequently our historical and theological study enables suffering and domination today.

We need a different way of reading the Bible. Scholz proposes that those who write or speak about scripture begin by recognizing that they “always make culturally, politically, and religiously charged claims about the world when they construct biblical meanings.”

2 Even silence—and sometimes especially silence—on such issues sends a powerful message about the biblical text’s connection to domination and suffering in contemporary society. 3 As an alternative, Scholz promotes an approach that “fosters analysis of the various interpretation histories of biblical literature,” highlights “the historical, theological, political, and ideological implications of biblical exegesis in the world,” “exposes interpretations…as ideological constructs,” and seeks to foster an “appreciation for textual fluidity, multiplicity, and ‘creolization.’”

Scholz’s way of reading the Bible sounds something like what is done in preparation for preaching. At least, Scholz points to the kind of work that a good preacher might do—exegeting a text, analyzing something of its history of interpretation, appreciating the ways in which the text’s language and voice(s) come in contact with voices and language today, and looking for theological/political/ideological implications for a contemporary audience. Scholz also points to the sociological framing that biblical

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2 Ibid. 156.
3 Scholz asserts that interpretations are “never mere descriptions of a long-gone past or expressions of personal piety in a society that is as violent as the United States of America” (157). She provides a fascinating illustration of this claim by probing US-American commentaries written since 2000 on Judges 21, revealing that “commentaries do not substantially challenge the idea that ‘certain women are made for killing’ or at least for abduction” (154).
4 Ibid. 156-7. Her hope is that those who write and speak about the Bible will more often “critique religious authority and sociopolitical demands for complicity and silence” (154). Note, Scholz refers to her approach as reading with a “sociological framework” (156).
scholarship often neglects in its analysis of the Old Testament in general, and the Servant Songs in particular. Interpreting the Servant Songs homiletically, however, models a different way of reading the Bible—one that necessarily engages historical and theological scholarship but looks explicitly for the ways in which these texts speak today.

This chapter examines the Servant Songs (Isa 42:1-4 (5-9); 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12) as homiletic responses to suffering and domination. Two approaches have frequently loomed large in modern interpretation of the Songs: historical criticism and Christological interpretation. Yet, what gets lost amidst historical and christological

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5 Shalom Paul notes that verses from the first Servant Song (42:5 especially) are recited in synagogues on the first Sabbath of the New Year for their connection with the cosmogony of Genesis 1, and their pointing to beginnings (72). He does not mention any use of the other three Songs in synagogue readings.

6 At least since Bernhard Duhm. The paradox here is that historical-critical analysis has delivered new insights into the workings of Isaiah while also obscuring the workings of Isaiah—especially when it comes to the Servant’s identity. For instance, Shalom Paul implies that historical-criticism engages in obfuscation: “Commentators are divided as to the identity of the servant in the four prophecies referred to as the ‘Servant Songs,’ ever since they were first isolated by Duhm in 1892….In the rest of Deutero-Isaiah’s early prophecies (41:8, 9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1-2, 21, 26; 45:4; 48:20; 50:10; 54:17 is the only example in the plural) there is unanimity regarding the identification of the servant as the nation in its entirety” (Isaiah 40–66. Eerdmans Critical Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 18). Patricia Tull is more direct in her assessment: “The relationship between Israel and the servant was obscured for decades by Bernhard Duhm’s theory of four servant songs in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 53, discontinuous with their contexts” (“Isaiah” 255-266 in Women’s Bible Commentary. Third Edition. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 263, emphasis added). Tull adds further, “throughout the complex argument that commences in 40:12, Israel is repeatedly called God’s servant (41:9l 44:21; 49:3). Scholars debate the exact terms, whether “servant” refers to all Israel, ideal Israel, or individual role models in Israel. However, poetry that pictures cities climbing mountains and delivering messages is not meant to be precise, but soaring and visionary. The Israel being addressed is the one that still thinks, ‘My way is hidden from YHWH, and my right is disregarded by my God’ (40:27). The poetry aims to change Israel’s mind about itself and its God. Thus the reigning question is not ‘Who is the servant?’ But, rather, ‘What is Israel’s role?’” (Tull, WBC 263).

7 The impact of Christian messianism on these passages is equally striking. In the Revised Common Lectionary, Isaiah 42 is read on the Baptism of the Lord, Epiphany,
disputes focused on the Servant’s identity is the fact that in each Song the Servant figure is used to highlight domination and to respond accordingly with what might be called a homiletic turn. The Servant experiences systemic injustice, economic depression, cultural disgrace, and theological abuse. In response, the Servant figure delivers “The word not heard in the street” (Isa 42:2b), has “A mouth like a sharp sword” (Isa 49:2a), speaks with the “Tongue of a teacher” (Isa 50:4a), and becomes “The startler of many nations” (Isa 52:15a).8

These homiletic moments not only engage suffering and domination in ancient, exilic contexts. They speak to contexts of domination and suffering today. They also help uncover forces of domination within our own hermeneutics. As such the Servant Songs provide a model for exploring the preaching of the Old Testament. As we examine the Songs from Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 52–53 we will find that these Songs preach, and they can help preachers proclaim the Old Testament more faithfully and effectively today.

Year A. Isaiah 49 is read a week later, also in Year A. Isa 50 is read in the Liturgy of the Passion and on Wednesday of Holy Week in all three years. And, Isaiah 52-53 is read on Good Friday every year. Such a reading practice in the Church creates the impression that the Songs, and Isaiah as a whole, are primarily focused on Jesus. Thus scholars like James Luther Mays can opine about Isaiah in ways that point as much to (later) christology as to textual evidence within Isaiah: “Simply put, Adonai is sovereign; there is a city of God; and there is a son of God” (James Luther Mays, “Isaiah’s Royal Theology and the Messiah” 39-51 in Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah, Christopher Seitz, ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 39-40, emphasis added). Mays pushes further for recognition of Jesus in Isaiah. Though, he ends with a slight corrective: “Christians are tempted to identify the reign of Jesus Messiah with their nation, their society, and his institutions, to believe that the confession ‘God is with us’ always means a divine guarantee to sustain the structures and the institutions on which we depend, and therefore to confuse faith in God with trust in our nation, our army, our social system. That confusion is the route to pride, arrogance, idolatry of what we have made. Our reliance on our institutions needs to be chastened by Isaiah’s proclamation of the Lord’s day against whatever subverts the Lord’s rule as ground of being and history” (50).

8 Unless otherwise noted, scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
3.1. Excursus on Preaching and Second Isaiah

While I claim only that the Servant Songs in Second Isaiah can be read homiletically as words responding to various forms of domination, it should be noted that Second Isaiah’s prologue begins with a call for multiple voices (plural imperative) to cry out or preach (qārā in Hebrew, predigt in German, 40:1-2). This call is followed by a voice crying out in the wilderness (qārā 40:3-5), a discussion about what to cry out (qārā 40:6-8), and a call for a feminine herald to declare good news (mibašerēt) from the mountaintop (40:9-11). Perhaps guided by this homiletically-centered prologue, many biblical scholars have begun to reflect on Second Isaiah’s genre as a form of preaching.

For instance, in her summary of developments within the history of Isaiah scholarship, Patricia Tull offers several intriguing insights into the nature of the prophetic corpus. Specifically, she notes that Second Isaiah has been described as a collection of voices describing God,9 that recontextualizes older texts,10 seeks to expand meaning,11

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9 Patricia Tull, “One Book, Many Voices: Conceiving Of Isaiah’s Polyphonic Message” 279-314 in As Those Who Are Taught: The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL. Claire Mathews McGinnis and Patricia K. Tull, eds. Society of Biblical Literature, 2006. Specifically Tull notes that the scholars of the Isaiah Seminar at the Society of Biblical Literature agreed broadly that the book of Isaiah is a sustained effort “to describe God’s dealings with Jerusalem over the course of several centuries.” And, further, that Isaiah is not a mere record of pre-exilic prediction and exilic/post-exilic fulfillment (290, emphasis added).

10 The book of Isaiah grew and took its final form as a result of “Reinterpretation and recontextualization of the prophet’s words for generations beyond his horizon” (Tull, “One Book, Many Voices”, 291, emphasis added).

11 “Rabbinic Bibles presenting the Scriptures in the center of the page surrounded by commentary declare visually this expansion around the text that began with Isaiah’s transmitters" (Tull, “One Book, Many Voices”, 294, emphasis added).
engages in conversation and debate,\textsuperscript{12} learns from tradition,\textsuperscript{13} and speaks “a word in season.”\textsuperscript{14} To illustrate these homiletic notes within scholars’ understanding of Second Isaiah, Tull points to one of the Servant Songs: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning God wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught (Isa 50:4).”

Indeed, there are many scholars who see in Second Isaiah marks of homiletic work.\textsuperscript{15} Claus Westermann speaks of “Deutero-Isaiah’s preaching” of “his gospel”\textsuperscript{16} and “proclaiming God’s word.”\textsuperscript{17} R.F. Melugin argues that Isaiah 40-55 “is a collection of originally independent units, but the arrangement is kerygmatic.”\textsuperscript{18} Klaus Baltzer reflects

\textsuperscript{12} Here Tull notes that scholars, like Benjamin Sommer, portray Isaiah as “a record of debate, of conversation, of revision within tradition;” others, like Claire Matthews, assert that Isaiah is “the product of a multiplicity of voices adding, generation by generation, to an original body of ‘authentic’ Isaianic prophecy, as that prophecy was reactualized, supplemented, and reinterpreted … a kind of prophetic chorus—and sometimes cacophony” (Tull, “One Book, Many Voices”, 312, \textit{emphasis added}).

\textsuperscript{13} Tull’s own view on Second Isaiah, and especially Isa 49-55, is that the prophet engages traditions from Jeremiah, Lamentations, Nahum, several Zion psalms, and First Isaiah (Tull, “One Book, Many Voices”, 304-5).

\textsuperscript{14} For Tull, Second Isaiah and its interpreters exemplify “the ongoing rhythm described by the prophet, of hearing and teaching, of listening in order to speak a word in season” (Tull, “One Book, Many Voices”, 314, \textit{emphasis added}).

\textsuperscript{15} This understanding of Isaiah as preacher likely began in the New Testament period. In his study of Paul’s use of Isaiah in Romans 9—11, Ross Wagner demonstrates that Isaiah’s insights and images shape Paul’s rhetoric. Even for something as important as Jewish and Christian relation to God, Paul will turn to the branches and roots of Isaiah’s tree imagery (Rom 11:16b-24). These observations lead Wagner to conclude that “Paul finds in Isaiah a fellow\textsuperscript{\textit{preacher}} of the gospel…a veiled prefiguration of his own mission to proclaim the good news” (Ross Wagner, \textit{Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul \textit{<In Concert> in the Letter to the Romans}}. London: Brill, 2002, 356, \textit{emphasis added}).


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 21.

on Deutero-Isaiah as “liturgical drama” set within “the act of worship.” Paul Hanson is intrigued with new and striking genre combinations in Isaiah 40-55. He asserts, “The Servant of the Lord passages perhaps illustrate this point most vividly, for, while drawing on prophetic call narratives, laments, and assurances of salvation, they represent a new form that defies precise classification.”

In his commentary on Isaiah 40–66, Shalom Paul describes the rhetoric of the text in ways that sound like a description of preaching. Paul observes “the repetition of words for emphatic purpose,” the use of “rhetorical questions,” “the employment of triads for the purposes of accentuation” and “insertion of quotations” often as dialogue. He describes further elements of proclamation, including multiple examples of assonance and alliteration, the use of leitmotifs, and “the repetition of words and expressions.” He finds poetic articulations of synonymous phrases and parallelisms and the engagement with many different literary genres, including: hymns, polemics, poems, words of consolation, rebuke, mock court scenes, eschatological tropes, and Servant Songs among

22 Ibid. 25.
23 Ibid. 26.
24 Ibid. 27.
25 Ibid. 30.
others. For all these reasons, Shalom Paul argues that the witnesses in Isaiah 40—66 demonstrate “a proclivity for words, expressions, and phrases.”

Joseph Blenkinsopp argues this point even further. Though his focus is only on Isa 40–55, he finds signs of rhetorical brilliance similar to what Paul observes. Blenkinsopp even adds a few more observations to the list. He notes that Second Isaiah establishes an immediate and frequently repeated ethos for the speaker. It employs calls for attention, apostrophes, and “repetition of words, phrases, and key images.” Its rhetoric offers striking imagery, alliteration, assonance, paronomasia, and anaphora. Second Isaiah engages in “The well-tested homiletic tactic of alternating reassurance and censure.” Blenkinsopp even goes so far as to argue that “One could find in these chapters [Isa 40-55] examples of practically all of the numerous types [of rhetoric] catalogued in books 8 and 9 of Quintilian’s classic Institutio Oratia.”

Far from merely acknowledging good rhetoric employed within a written manuscript, Blenkinsopp offers a generic assessment of his findings. He asserts that Isaiah 40–55 “stood at the oral end of the orality-literacy continuum.” These chapters

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26 Ibid. 31.
27 Ibid. 27.
28 “The speaker begins by representing himself and his prophetic associates as authorized to address his public, and the source of the authorization is indicated right from the start (‘says your God,’ 40:1). The frequent use of introductory and concluding formulas from the old prophetic tradition…keeps this ultimate authorization before the audience throughout” (Joseph Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible Series. New York: Doubleday, 2002, 62).
29 Ibid. 63.
30 Ibid. 64.
31 Ibid. 63.
32 Ibid. 63-4.
33 Ibid. 64.
are best understood through the lens of homiletics. They point to an orator, trained in public speaking. They participate in a homiletic tradition that arises following the fall of Jerusalem and continued through the early years Persian rule. Their peers include a group of “public speakers, or preachers” whose proclamation is documented in parts of Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomic strand in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and parts of Zechariah. Blenkinsopp asserts further that the context of Isaiah 40-55 should be understood as a place of preaching, “perhaps an inchoate synagogue network of some kind—in which this activity was going on.” He points to similar preaching settings for correlative works.

Taken together, these observations about Second Isaiah’s rhetoric, form, peers, and context lead Blenkinsopp to conclude: “The core of 40-55 may then properly be described as a rhetorical composition and its author as an orator or preacher.”

From this broader claim about Second Isaiah, some scholars have begun approaching the Songs as a form of proclamation. For instance, Carolyn Sharp and

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34 “there is enough prosodic indeterminancy in these chapters to justify speaking of their author as orator rather than poet…The orator, trained in an elevated, declamatory style of public speaking, makes use of as wide a range of linguistic resources as the poet” (Blenkinsopp 68).
35 Ibid. 53.
36 Ibid. 66.
37 Ibid. 53.
38 Ibid. 53.
39 Here he proposes a context for Isa 40–55 like “the elders gathering in Ezekiel’s house (Ezek 8:1; 14:1; 20:1) and the religious center at Casiphia in southern Mesopotamia (Ezra 8:15-20)…a kind of clergy training center…where religious learning and training went on” (Blenkinsopp 64-5).
40 Ibid. 69.
41 Unless otherwise specified, “Songs” is not a generic assessment. Rather “Songs” or “Servant Songs” refer to the well-known passages marked off by Bernhard Duhm from parts of Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 53. I agree with John Goldingay’s and David Payne's assessment of Isa 49:1-6, which may be extended to all of the “Songs”: such a passage “might be described as a poem and/or autobiographical narrative and/or a testimony. It is
Leonora Tubbs Tisdale observe the multivalent nature of the Songs’ references to the Servant. They propose that the “motif of the Suffering Servant invites homiletical appropriations that explore aspects of courageous and sacrificial leadership.” Arvid Kapelrud argues further that Second Isaiah is a preacher and the Servant Songs are a homiletical rebuke of the people via exemplary counter-narration. While my own reading of the Songs differs from Kapelrud’s—I see resistance to domination rather than a mere (intramural) rebuke—the point here is that if Isaiah 40-55 can be understood as a form of preaching, then the Servant Songs become not just influential texts within Jewish

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42 “No single identification works well for every mention of the Servant. That fact itself could be used to illustrate the richness of scriptural signifying. The motif of the Suffering Servant invites homiletical appropriations that explore aspects of courageous and sacrificial leadership in the faithful community as those may be conceived before the time of Christ, during Jesus’ own ministry, and in vocations in the subsequent history of communities of believers” (Leonora Tubbs Tisdale and Carolyn Sharp, “The Prophets and Homiletics” 627-651 in The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets, Carolyn Sharp, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2016) 636.

43 Arvid Kapelrud, “The Main Concern of Second Isaiah” Vetus Testamentum XXXII, 1 (1982): 50-58. Kapelrud claims that Second Isaiah “preached at the end of the Exile” (50); that “his preaching must be judged by whether he succeeded in reaching anxious and pessimistic people “with the words of God” (51); Kapelrud notes that “as the preaching of the prophet goes on his voice changes” (52); And: “Because salvation means first and foremost release from captivity, it is not surprising that salvation and redemption seem to be one and the same thing in the preaching of the prophet” (54); “This all-embracing salvation is important. The words indicate that the prophet had an aim that went beyond the preaching of immediate salvation for deported people” (55); Further: “as his preaching reveals that the people had not only lost their courage, but also their faith in their God” (56); Finally, Kapelrud finds proclamation of good news: “YHWH would again do great deeds, as he had done when he led his people out of Egypt (xliii 3, 18 ff., xlv 14). It was necessary to preach in this way, for the people had lost confidence in their God” (57).

44 “The way in which the Suffering Servant is depicted, whether it was done by Second Isaiah or somebody else, shows that the behavior of the people, and the relation between YHWH and his rebellious people, were seen as important issues in the preaching of the prophet” (Kapelrud 58).
and Christian traditions, but snapshots of exemplary preaching moments that are worthy of further homiletic reflection. It is to this reflection that our study now turns.

3.2. Subverting Systemic Injustice—Isaiah 42:1-4 (5-9)

The first four verses of Isaiah 42 present the servant. Of course, this is not the first time that the servant has appeared in Isaiah. Most notably, the servant is described in Isa 41:8-9 as the people of Israel. Jacob Stromberg notes that other linguistic connections between these two passages suggest that Isa 42:1-4 developed with an awareness of the servant material in Isa 41. Looking beyond chapters 41 and 42, James Kennedy asserts that the word “servant” plays on king—minister connections in Isaiah. He notes that servant is paired with lord in Isa 24:2a. The Rabshakeh also highlights this understanding of servant in his speech in Isa 36:9. Two verses later the Jerusalem representatives use “servant” as a mode of “diplomatic deference.” The servants of King Hezekiah come to speak with Isaiah in 37:5. And, later in the chapter, Isaiah

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45 “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, ‘You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off’” (Isa 41:8-9).
46 “42.1-4 (which was considered secondary) is clearly related to 41.8-10 (which was not). In both, one finds reference made to the ‘servant’ and ‘chosen one’ whom God will ‘uphold’ (tāmaq)—a verb occurring only one further time in the book where the connection is quite different (33.15)” (Stromberg 33).
48 “And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master.”
49 “How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master’s servants (יִנֹדֲא יֵ֥דְבַע).”
50 Kennedy 184, referring to Isa 36:11a: “Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, “Please speak to your servants (יֶ֖אֱלֹהִי נְבֵיתוֹ) in Aramaic.”
proclaims a message from the Lord against King Sennacherib of Assyria, who has
mocked the Lord through the king's servants.\(^{51}\) Citing these and several other references
in Isaiah, Kennedy asserts that servant should be understood “in terms of the relation
between a monarch and subject.”\(^{52}\)

Indeed, Isaiah 42:1-4 assumes this kind of relationship between the servant and a
lord, but there is a nuance here that is noteworthy. No longer can the servant be
connected to an Israelite king. The exile has eliminated that possibility. And, though a
foreign king presently dominates them,\(^ {53}\) the claim of the text is that the people only

\(^{51}\) “By your servants (lit. “by the hand of your servants”) you have mocked the Lord” (Isa
37:24).
\(^{52}\) Kennedy 184-5.
\(^{53}\) Despite ongoing debate about Jewish life under Babylonian and Persian control; it is
clear that the Babylonians and Persians had ultimate control of what was permissible for
Jews in exile and even in return to Jerusalem. Hugh Williamson argues that Second
Isaiah responds to both of these contexts. Isa 40-48, including the Cyrus oracle, reflects a
setting in Babylonia before Cyrus came to control the area; whereas Isa 49-55 suggests a
later setting in Jerusalem (“The Setting of Deutero-Isaiah: Some Linguistic
Considerations” 253-267 in Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context, Jonathan Stökl
and Caroline Waerzeggers, eds. (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015). Blenkinsopp agrees:
“allusions to Cyrus in Isa 40-48 indicate that the last decade of the Neo-Babylonian
Empire (ca. 550-539) was when the core of this section of the book was composed (93).
During this time, the city of Babylon was “rebuilt on a scale unprecedented elsewhere”
(93). Of Jewish life in Babylonia, Daniel Smith-Christopher asserts that Isaiah’s
references to the exodus may be a response to the exiles’ experiences of slavery.
Inscriptions from Nebuchadnezzar II speak of forcing exiles to work to make bricks—
what Smith-Smith-Christopher refers to as “corvée labor” framed with “strong terms of
Conditions do not seem to have improved by the time Nabonidus took power. Indeed, as
Smith-Christopher observes, Hebrew words for “imprisonment” frequently appear in
biblical texts as metaphors for the experience of living in exile (72). Of life under Cyrus’
rule, Jon Berquist observes, “there is little indication that there were significant changes
in the condition of Yehud as a result of Cyrus’ rise to power” and “There was no
restoration of a Jerusalem community” (Judaism in Persia’s Shadow: A Social and
Historical Approach, (Eugene: Wipe & Stock, 1995) 29). Though Berquist thinks the
exiles like those who penned Isa 40-55 supported Cyrus, he also notes that Cyrus offered
“little material support” and showed “little attempt to change the realities of life in
appear to be his servants. Israel—collectively and individually—is the Lord’s servant. In light of ancient nomenclature for monarch-servant relations, this claim holds subversive undertones.

And, the description of the servant in 42:1-4 continues these undertones. The servant is upheld, chosen, and a source of delight (1a). Shalom Paul notes here that the verb “upheld” connotes physical support—as in the passage where Aaron and Hur upheld Moses’ hands in the battle with Amalek thus ensuring divine deliverance (Ex 17:12). This connection with divine help leading to victory is also echoed in Isa 41:10, where the people-as-servant are told not to fear for God will “uphold you with my victorious right hand.” The upheld servant is also said to be chosen. Here again is an echo with Isa 41:9: “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off.” Indeed, “chosen” frequently appears with “servant” in the early chapters of Second Isaiah.55 There may also be a parallel here with Akkadian royal inscriptions that single out the king as the god’s “beloved one” and “favored one.”56 In this light, a third appellation, the one “in whom my soul delights,” could also be seen as evoking the Akkadian trope of divine

Yehud” (42). Lester Grabbe emphasizes this point more bluntly, arguing that Cyrus was not particularly interested in Jews or in rebuilding the temple (“The Reality of the Return: The Biblical Picture Versus Historical Reconstruction” 292-308 in Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context, Jonathan Stökl and Caroline Waerzeggers, eds. (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015) 307. Baltzer adds that though the Persian authorities stressed their political and religious tolerance, “it cannot have been pleasant to come into conflict with them” (29). And further, though the prophet stressed Jerusalem’s independence, the people still were required to render military service and pay tribute to their Persian overlords (32).

54 Paul 184.
55 See 41:8, ; 43:10; 44:1, 2; 45:4. For other uses of “chosen” in SI see 43:10, 20; 44:1, 2; 45:4; 49:7.
56 Paul 185
favor for a leader. Such connections would put the servant in the place of a king. For this reason, Joseph Blenkinsopp suggests that “servant” here is a reference to Cyrus (compare 45:1), though he admits, “Much of what is said in these verses could also be said of Israel.” Homiletically, it is intriguing to leave the referent ambiguous, acknowledging that Isa 42:1 could refer to a powerful king like Cyrus or to an oppressed people who have a royal panegyric spoken over them, thus inverting the expected hierarchy.

This servant has the spirit (ruaḥ). Thus far in Second Isaiah, ruaḥ has referred to YHWH’s power to wear down people (40:7), YHWH’s independence from outside control (40:13), and YHWH’s redemptive work (revenge?) that scatters even the mightiest mountains like chaff (41:16). In Isa 41:29 YHWH laments that the messages of Zion thus far are little more than an “empty wind” (ruaḥ wāṭāhū). So here in 42:1 the servant receives YHWH’s spirit, what Shalom Paul calls the “special charisma” frequently conferred on prophets, kings, and leaders for a “specific mission.”

Clearly, the servant’s specific mission is one focused on justice. Justice appears three times in 42:1-4. The servant will “bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1), “faithfully bring forth justice” (42:3), and “not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (42:4). This justice mission has a large scope, addressing the nations (goyim) and including the entire earth (‘āres). The servant is not responding

57 Blenkinsopp 211.
58 David Reimer points to Norman Gottwald’s work highlighting how Cyrus’ policy of return was a “colonial situation” wherein a “ruling elite” were “beholden to the empire whose expectation was that the colony would be politically pacified and economically profitable” (Reimer, “Isaiah and Politics” 84-103 in Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches. David Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009) 101.
59 Paul 185.
here to an isolated moment of injustice perpetrated by a lone individual. Rather, as gōyim and ‘āres indicate, the servant is to focus on larger systems and patterns of injustice. Such could be spoken about a kingly figure—again, perhaps referring to Cyrus. As Julianna Claassens observes, the servant is called to enlighten the world and “to bring forth light and justice to the other.” This description sounds quite similar to aggrandizing inscriptions that an ancient near eastern monarch would write of himself. And yet, there is a subtle message here not often spoken of a king, except, perhaps, of Cyrus. As William Holladay observes, the strong servant is also nonviolent, and the servant’s mission is to bring “not justice in general but quite specifically liberation.”

The picture here is of one who takes a unique approach to bringing about justice. Again, kings bragged of bringing justice. But here the servant is said not to break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick (Isa 42:3). Neither will the servant cry out or make her message of justice heard in the streets (Isa 42:2). In these alternative

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61 Compare the Cyrus inscription in which he brags of not only being “king of the world” but of establishing “the seat of government”, “endeavoring to worship [Marduk]”, striving “for peace in Babylon and in all his other sacred cities”, and bringing “relief to their dilapidated housing” (The Ancient Near East Volume 1: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures. James Pritchard, ed., (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1958) 207.

62 Shalom Paul narrates that because of an inter-religious dispute, the priests of Marduk welcomed Cyrus’ conquest, opening the city gates to his forces and granting him a bloodless victory (14).


64 Ibid. 105, emphasis added.

65 Compare Isa 33:7 where the heroes/valiant cry in the streets. Compare also YHWH’s shouting in 42:13.
approaches—and within all of vv 1-9—James Kennedy finds a subtle effort to subvert the Babylonian cult. He cites Tablet 6/8 of the mīs pî series of a Babylonian purification ritual that presents Marduk scattering water and shouting through the streets.\(^{66}\) Since Isaiah's servant is out in the streets (but decidedly not crying out), Kennedy argues that Isaiah 42 points to a participation in Babylonian religious themes that seeks to subvert its truth and efficacy.\(^{67}\) In this light, the servant is subtly rejecting Babylonian approaches to religion and power in pursuing a mission of liberating justice.

Perhaps this mission participates in tactics that James C. Scott describes in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Here Scott observes that domination leads to masked communication of resistance. He asserts, “the greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast…the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask.”\(^ {68}\) This mask is what Scott calls the “public transcript”—the open way in which subordinates communicate hidden messages in the presence of those who dominate.\(^ {69}\) Examples of the public transcript include donning “the

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\(^{67}\) Ibid. 192.


\(^{69}\) Ibid. 2.
flattering self-image of elites,””70 engaging in rituals of subordination,71 “playing dumb,”72 and concealing “anger, revenge, and self-assertion.”73

At the same time, Scott argues, dominated people will find ways to communicate subversive messages to hearers in the know. This is what Scott calls the “hidden transcript.” The hidden transcript employs a “politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors.”74 It is communication that cannot be recognized without “a privileged peek backstage” into the “speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.”75 Such disguising often employs seemingly innocuous genres such as rumors, gossip, folktale, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, euphemisms, folk culture, and trickster tales.76

In her analysis of Scott, Anathea Portier-Young articulates well the potential function of public and hidden transcripts:

Songs of courage, hope, anger, or sorrow carrying promises of retribution and reward can be sung out loud in the presence of the master while those who sing them deny that they carry any meaning at all. No one knows who wrote them; no one will vouch for what they really mean. These special forms of speech make it possible publicly to communicate the hidden transcript, thinly veiling from the powerful its message of resistance while strengthening the weak in their resolve to resist.77

70 Ibid. 18-19.
71 Ibid. 35.
72 Ibid. 133.
73 Ibid. 18-19.
74 Ibid. 18-19.
75 Scott also notes that the hidden transcript can also be seen through a “rupture in the performance” (4-5).
76 Ibid. 18-19.
77 Anathea Portier-Young, Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 33.
In many ways, Portier-Young’s words are a fitting description of the first Servant Song. Isaiah 42:1-4(5-9) is composed by an unknown author. On its face, the Song refers to a beloved and chosen servant who brings justice to the world (like Cyrus), or to one who cries out in the streets (like Marduk). And yet, the servant’s identity is far from clear. Only by attending to the exilic community’s thinly veiled conversations beyond this passage does one get the idea that Israel is the servant, that the servant’s loyalty is to YHWH rather than the king, that the Spirit’s anointing enables resistance, and that the servant’s justice mission is bigger and far more radical in nature than Persian policy changes.

The first Servant Song can be understood as a masked communication of resistance to domination. It presents a public transcript to its overlords. In the creative historiography of Josephus, penned nearly 600 years later, Cyrus even read over some of these chapters and found them to be speaking affirmatively of him. At the same time, the prophet offers to hearers-in-the-know a subtle, hidden transcript that builds energy for liberation efforts. Consider the portrayal of the servant’s preaching in Isaiah 42:5-9:

Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,

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78 In his analysis of intertextual references within Isaiah, Frederik Poulsen observes Isaiah 42:1-9 connecting with “the theme of torah (e.g. 2:2-4; 51:4-8) and the theme of blindness (e.g. 6:9-10; 35:5; 42:18-25). Some relations exist to the messianic oracles of Isa 1—39…and to passages portraying Israel (41:8-16), Cyrus (45:1-13), and the servant/prophet (49:1-13; 61:1-3)” (God, His Servant, and the Nations in Isaiah 42:1-9: Biblical and Theological Reflections after Brevard S. Childs and Hans Hübner, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 115).

79 Josephus. Antiquities 11.5-7. Joseph Blenkinsopp, among others, is skeptical about the accuracy of Josephus’ report—especially the notion that Cyrus’ reading of Isa 44:28–44:1 inspired him to liberate Jews from captivity and seek to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (81).
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
   I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
   a light to the nations,
   to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
   from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the LORD, that is my name;
   my glory I give to no other,
   nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
   and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
   I tell you of them.

Notice here that the preacher’s identity remains hidden. Portier-Young argues “the device of pseudonymity served not to hide the person or community…but rather to assert that they were not the originators of this counterdiscourse. The guarantee of their revelation stood upon the givenness of tradition: the plan of God was embedded in creation, fixed for all time, and handed down in the unitary witness of a great figure from long ago.”

While Portier-Young is writing about later apocalyptic literature, it should be noted that Isaiah contains some of the earliest proto-apocalyptic literature and thus may participate in a similar agenda. Furthermore, the first Servant Song, like later apocalyptic literature, seems to use anonymity with the intent of grounding the servant’s message in God’s plan (and voice) that began in creation and continues through the exodus into the present.

80 Portier-Young 35.
82 See Isa 24–27; 33.
This sermon can be understood through the lens of a public and hidden transcript. Consider a few examples. First, the creation references in verses 5 and 6 contain two different echoes of Mesopotamian texts. As Shalom Paul observes, the phrases “stretched out [the heavens]” and “spread out the earth” have a parallel in *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*:

“Wherever the earth is established (šaknat), and the heavens spread out (ritpašu).”

So also, Isaiah’s line, “grasped you by the hand” has a parallel in the Cyrus Cylinder wherein Marduk “reached for a righteous king whom he would support [lit. ‘grasp by the hand’].” These connections might lead Babylonian and Persian overhearers to receive the words of this Jewish, exilic preacher as a parroting of the flattering self-image of elites. At the same time, however, a Jewish exile would hear phrases like “created the heavens” (v. 5), “breath to the people” (v. 5), and light given to those in darkness (vv 6–7) and hear the creation account in Genesis 1, a text that likely also developed in exilic times. References to the creator God of Genesis highlight one who is more ancient and more powerful than any current divine or human overlord. It is this Creator God—and

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83 Paul 188, citing *BWL*, 58-9, line 37.
not any earthly leader—who “calls”, “takes”, “keeps”, and “gives” the servant, Israel (42:6). Thomas Mann calls this approach a “theology of creative redemption” that is akin to liberation theology.\textsuperscript{86} Brueggemann adds that the servant’s preaching here is meant to ensure that Israel is “well protected and irresistibly energized.”\textsuperscript{87} The message to the exiles is that their fate depends not on Cyrus’ political calculations but on the one who made them and who gives them breath. Their liberation is not the work of any overlord but of the “lord of history” who is about to “create new things.”\textsuperscript{88}

Second, the preacher says that the work of the Creator God is to give “you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations” (42:6). As Meredith Stone notes, “covenant to the people” is a difficult phrase to interpret, because “people” can refer to either “all of humanity” or to “Israel” specifically.\textsuperscript{89} The fact that interpretation of this phrase remains unresolved points to the openness of expression that would again allow oppressors to hear one message and Jewish exiles to hear another. Thus, the public transcript might sound like the preacher is engaging in a ritual of subordination that echoes Cyrus’ propaganda of peace and respect for all people and religions. Here Cyrus becomes the

\textsuperscript{87} Brueggemann, \textit{Isaiah 40-66} 43.
\textsuperscript{88} Poulsen 107.
\textsuperscript{89} Meredith Stone, “The Servant that Brings Light” \textit{Review and Expositor} 2017, Vol. 114(1):101–109, 104-5. Note, Stone makes the case for interpreting “people” as a reference to all humanity: “Three reasons point to a reading of all people or humanity as most fitting: (i) the same word appears in 42:5 in reference to all humanity; (ii) in 42:6 “people” does not have an article, as is often found when it refers to Israel/Judah; and (iii) the phrase is in synonymous parallelism with “light to nations,” and nations typically include people outside of Israel/Judah” (105).
covenant maker and enactor. The hidden transcript, however, points to YHWH’s promises to a wandering patriarch from Ur of the Chaldees (Gen 15:7-21). YHWH remembers this covenant when the people are enslaved in a foreign country, and seeks to bring about their liberation by calling an individual and a people to action: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians…I am the LORD’” (Exod 6:2-8).

Here YHWH enacts the covenant and fulfills it especially in contexts of domination.

Third, perhaps it is not surprising then that the servant’s preaching references YHWH three times in five verses (5, 6, 8) while twice employing the expression first introduced in Exodus: “I am YHWH” (6, 8). This way of speaking of God gives the preacher a way to “play dumb” if questioned by his overhearing overlords; the preacher could claim this is simply the name of Israel’s God. And yet, there are clear connections of YHWH’s name with covenant, liberation, torah, and return. Further, the verb “to bring forth,” which describes the task of the servant three times (42:1, 3, 7), is also the verb “used to describe the deliverance from Egypt.”

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90 This echoes the approach taken in the Cyrus Cylinder which “attributes to a non-Persian god Cyrus’ success in taking Babylon. However, in this text the god is Marduk, not Yahweh” (Stone 104).
91 Baltzer thinks this connection is “unmistakable;” so much so that he retorts, “Who does not know the scene with the burning bush, which has its center in the revelation of the divine name!” (133). This rhetorical question, however, might be answered by pointing precisely to non-Jewish oppressors in Babylonia who might have overheard preaching along the lines of Isa 42:5-9.
92 Compare Leviticus 19, which has God saying, “I am YHWH,” after nearly ever law (fifteen times in all).
the book of Exodus, the preaching of Second Isaiah develops subtle nuances around the phrase from Exodus, “I am YHWH.”94 Taken together these exodus connections remind Jewish exiles that their liberator was not Pharaoh and it will not be Cyrus. God’s “I,” which appears eight times in this sermon, allows there to be focus on only one liberator.95 Ultimately, it is God who will overthrow oppressors, end domination systems, and lead God’s people to freedom and to abundance.

Finally, these connections with creation, covenant, and exodus96 give a different resonance to verses 8 and 9. On the one hand, the preacher may again offer some subtle references to Akkadian language and logic in these verses.97 More importantly, however, because of earlier allusions to Marduk and Cyrus, verse eight’s prohibition against idols sounds differently in Babylonian and Persian ears. It may sound like a rejection of

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94 Within Second Isaiah, the phrase “I am YHWH” is connected with calling generations (41:4), offering help (41:13), providing water to those who are parched (41:17), making covenant (42:6), claiming glory over idols and others (42:8), giving Egypt as a ransom (43:3), being the creator and king of Israel (43:15), providing treasures/riches (45:3), establishing the supremacy of God (45:5-7), raining down righteousness (45:8), speaking truth (45:18-19), recognizing a righteous, savior God (45:21), redeeming that leads Israel in the way it should go (48:17), kings and queens being made to bow to Israel (49:23), oppressors consuming their own flesh and blood (49:26).

95 Joan Cook also sees here an emphasis on the one-ness of God (“Everyone Called By My Name: Second Isaiah’s Use of the Creation Theme” 35-47 in Earth, Wind and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation, Carol J. Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan, eds. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 42).

96 These themes are what Richard Clifford calls the “cornerstone of [Second Isaiah’s] interpretation and preaching” (“The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation” Theological Studies 46 no. 3 (1985): 507-523, 518).

97 Paul finds echoes of Akkadian language in verse 7, specifically with regard to references about showing light and setting free (190). Paul also asserts that the logic in 5-9 echoes the logic of the goddess Ishtar’s promise to King Esarhaddon: “Could you not rely on the precious utterance which I spoke to you? Now you can rely on this latter one too.” (Paul 191, citing Parpola, Assyrian Prophecies, p. 10, lines 7-12).
Nabonidus and his favored moon-god, Sin.\textsuperscript{98} If the Cyrus Cylinder is to be trusted, the priests of Marduk are the ones who opened the gates to Cyrus’ army, whereupon Cyrus destroyed all relics for worshipping the moon god and reestablished the gods Nabonidus had removed.\textsuperscript{99} Such connections may help slightly conceal elements of the preacher’s anger, revenge, and self-assertion that are expressed in the line: “I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols” (42:8).\textsuperscript{100} For an exiled Judean hearing these words in the context of creation, covenant, and exodus, this verse is most clearly the rejection of all idols and those leaders who support them. Thus, it is not simply that “the text is criticizing the people who expect everything from ‘Cyrus,’” as Baltzer claims.\textsuperscript{101} Rather, the text criticizes Cyrus, the Persian rule, and Babylonian culture as idolatrous usurpation of God’s glory. And, as resonances with the exodus narrative make clear,\textsuperscript{102} God will respond to rectify the abuse: “See, the former things have come to pass [i.e. the exodus], and new things I now declare” (42:9).

\textsuperscript{98} As Nilsen narrates: “In the background of the [Cyrus] Cylinder stands Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king (ruling 556–539 B.C.E.). Nabonidus claimed to restore the forgotten cult of the moon-god Sin; according to his critics, though, it was not a restoration, but a new invention. Be that as it may; the situation led to a neglect of the cult of other gods, including that of Marduk, who was Babylon’s city-god, and the highest god of the pantheon. Supposedly even the \textit{akitu} (New Year) festival, thought to be vital for ensuring peace and fertility for both land and people, was abolished by Nabonidus” (8).

\textsuperscript{99} Nilsen 9.

\textsuperscript{100} Compare Isa 48:11-12: “For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for why should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called: I am He; I am the first, and I am the last.”

\textsuperscript{101} Baltzer 135.

\textsuperscript{102} Cook asserts, “Just as God’s instructions to Moses regarding how to confront the Pharaoh (Exodus 6-11) included reassurance that God knew how events would turn out, likewise the prophet can take comfort in the divine knowledge of what would happen now” (42).
This analysis of the first Servant Song highlights several key insights into what preachers might learn from Second Isaiah about preaching the Old Testament. First, the language of preaching is poetic, flexible, open-ended, and imaginative. While this observation is certainly not a new homiletical insight, its application to the Servant Song does offer a different way of interpreting the text. Reading Isaiah 42 homiletically invites one to leave open many of the questions that exegetes most frequently attempt to pin down. Who is the servant—Cyrus, Israel, the hearer/reader, or perhaps another? Is it YHWH’s covenant that is enacted by Cyrus, Cyrus’s covenant that aligns with YHWH’s, or YHWH’s covenant that the people will help enact more fully? Is justice a Persian policy change or is it liberation from Babylonian and Persian control? Is the spirit’s work creative, destructive, or liberative? Is the problem with idols a reference to Nabonidus’s work, or to Cyrus’s restoration of the gods, or to the power idols are granted in general? Is the preacher’s audience a group of Jewish exiles, an individual prophet, or representatives of Cyrus? Is Second Isaiah’s message the public transcript or the hidden one? In all cases the best answer might be, simply, “yes.” There is something destructive that happens when interpreters force the Isaianic preacher to only say one thing in 42:1-9. Shoehorning these verses into one meaning sacrifices the depth and breadth of the

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sermon’s references. Forcing one take above all others flattens out the exilic preacher’s words and saps them of their poetic potency as a resource for reflection.

Second, this Servant Song offers a distinct model for preaching Old Testament texts. In chapter 42, the preacher engages the older parts of her scriptural tradition.\(^{104}\) This engagement with the older testament\(^ {105}\) notably does not participate in many of the ways that Christians have preached the Old Testament. The preacher here does not search for a sermon theme or concept. There is no allegorizing of an older text. If there is a typological reading, it is rooted in a shared experience of oppression in a foreign land. The preacher does not develop a promise and fulfillment schema here, though some of

\(^{104}\) Though if John Van Seters is correct, much of the biblical material that Isaiah cites is a newer version of older material: "the Yahwist and Second Isaiah were contemporaries, living among the exiles in Babylonia and very likely in very close contact with each other….When the two works are read in tandem, with the Yahwist providing the “biblical” text as a basis for much of the prophet’s message, this gives us remarkable insight into the new world of the diaspora community in Babylonia and the radical reshaping of their religion within a wider world view. Under the influence of the Babylonian universalistic religion of Marduk, the creator deity, or Nabonidus’s supreme deity, the god Sin, both Second Isaiah and the Yahwist present their deity YHWH not just as a national god but as creator of heaven and earth and the God of all humanity. Such a religion is not under the control of a priesthood or temple in a particular place, and neither author makes any mention of priests or the Jerusalem Temple. The form of worship of YHWH used by the patriarchs may be practiced in any place and is open to all without restriction” (John Van Seters, “Dating the Yahwhist’s History: Principles and Perspectives” *Biblica* 96.1 (2015): 1-25, 24).

\(^{105}\) As stated in the Introduction, the term “older testament” is obviously a Christian, anachronistic term. Nevertheless, I use it here and throughout this chapter as a way to highlight the witness of older scriptures that are then reinterpreted by Second Isaiah in light of the new experience of the Babylonian exile. Further, the use of “older testament” functions as a rhetorical/homiletical device to underscore that Christians are not the first who read and reinterpreted older scriptural texts in new contexts. Thus, the work of Second Isaiah in these Songs can be instructive for Christian preachers’ interpretation and proclamation of the Old Testament.
those approaches do exist within Second and Third Isaiah. The preacher’s look at the history of salvation is neither linear nor developing from lesser to greater. The older testament does not become a source of proof-texting for arguing a point. The preacher offers more here than an inductive, re-narration of scripture. Nor is there a four-fold heuristic applied to an older text.

Instead of all these approaches, the preacher in Isaiah 42 focuses on the language of the scripture as that which speaks into the present moment. The older testament is not a historically distant artifact. Rather, the preacher portrays God’s voice as an active preaching voice to the congregation. The Creator of heaven and earth is the God who is giving breath to the people now, ruah to those walking around, light to those in darkness today. The Abrahamic/Mosaic covenant is re-enacted in the hearing of the congregation. The former things—creation and exodus—have come to pass and they are springing forth anew.

As a part of the effort to have scriptural language speak today, the preacher depicts the God of the older testament in present, active ways. The God of creation speaks. The God of the exodus says repeatedly to the congregation, “I am YHWH.” Here the God of the older testament is neither historically distant nor substantively reimagined. Rather, the one who gave breath, gives breath. The one who liberated slaves, liberates exiles. In the preaching of Isaiah 42:1-9, God’s nature and work are consistent—they do not change. What God has done in the past, God is doing now, and God will do more

\[106\] Rather, Isaiah 42:1-9 may present an exodus-promise and exodus-fulfillment model, indicating that YHWH’s new, exilic-promise will also achieve fulfillment.
fully in the future. And, the preacher leads the congregation to hear and to speak this reality of God’s nature.\textsuperscript{107}

Finally, the preaching in this Servant Song demonstrates that the Old Testament is a resource for resistance to domination and for the alleviation of suffering. As the discussion of the hidden transcript illustrated, references to Exodus remind the people that it is God—not foreign superpowers—who has called, taken, kept, and given the people in a covenant to bring justice, to bring out prisoners, and to shine light unto the nations. The references to creation remind marginalized hearers that they are upheld, chosen, and spirit-filled ones in whom God finds delight. These messages run directly counter to the systemic oppression and dehumanizing anthropology that Isaiah’s hearers experience through Babylonian and Persian domination.

However, it is not only the material from the older testament that is a resource for resistance. Isaiah 42:1-9 itself has become a text for resisting oppressive regimes through preaching. For instance, an early rabbinic interpretation of Isa 42:1-9 sees it as license to challenge Caesar’s domination and claim to be God.\textsuperscript{108} And, when Rev. James R. L.

\textsuperscript{107} For more on cultural-linguistic approaches to preaching (Jesus), see Charles Campbell, \textit{Preaching Jesus: The New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology} (Eugene: Wipf & Stock: 1997) and David Lose, \textit{Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

\textsuperscript{108} In the story emperor Hadrian seeks to be declared God. Three philosophers advise him, the last of which presents to Hadrian a problem of a stalled ship at sea. The emperor says that he will send ships to rescue it, but the philosopher asks, “Sire, why trouble your legions and ships to go there? Dispatch a bit of wind there, and thus you will rescue it.” When caesar admits that he is not able to create a wind, the philosopher states, “You cannot create a wind? How then can you make yourself God, in whose name it is said, ‘Thus saith the Lord, He that created the heavens, and stretched them forth, He that spread forth the earth and that which cometh out of it, He that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein (Isa 42:5)?’” (Hayim Nahman Bialik
Diggs, Pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Baltimore, spoke at the Third International Convention of the United Negro Improvement Association in August 1922, he preached on Isaiah 42:4, “He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth.”

Perhaps most notably, is a sermon that Oscar Romero preached on Isaiah 42:1-7 in response to the oppression of Salvadorans and the defamation of clergy by the government. In some ways, Romero’s preaching simply follows traditional exegesis and theology. He sees Isaiah 42 as a reference to Cyrus, and he sees Cyrus as a form of messiah that pre-figures Christ. At the same time, Romero pushes his congregation to understand the text as open-ended and imaginative: “This figure is transformed into a

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109 To get a sense of the spirit of Diggs’s message, one need only look to his work at the UNIA Convention, when he joined Marcus Garvey in rejecting an offer from a “well known Bible Society” that wanted to give every UNIA delegate a Bible. Commenting on this rebuffed offer, Diggs told the New York World, “We are not atheists by any means, and we are not rejecting the Bible. What we are doing to-day is registering an emphatic protest against Christianity as it is interpreted in this country.” The UNIA proposed instead that the Bible Society distribute those Bibles in the South, “among those obsessed with race and religious prejudice.” Alan Callahan, The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible (New Haven: Yale, 2006) 171, citing Amy Jacques Garvey, Garvey and Garveyism. (Kingston, Jamaica: United Printers, 1963) 104.


111 “In today’s reading, Isaiah presents us with a summary of an historical person: Cyrus, the king of Persia. He is pressing the authorities for the release of the Jewish community from captivity in Babylon. Babylon will yield to the pressure of Cyrus and the exiled community views Cyrus as a king who has saving power: When Babylon comes under the power of Cyrus, we will be given freedom, we will return to Jerusalem and this oppression will be removed. Therefore the Bible views Cyrus as a Messiah figure” (Romero 5).
poetic figure that Isaiah calls the Servant of Yahweh, the servant of God. No longer is this person simply the king of Persia, a man with human, saving powers, rather he is someone mysterious….” After inviting his congregation to reflect on the Servant as a symbol for God’s mysterious agents of salvation, Romero turns to the situation in El Salvador:

Even though we might experience brokenness, even though we might feel like a candle that is about to be extinguished, even though we might experience a profound sense of frustration because of our sinfulness, because of the sins of the social classes, because of the abuses of political systems, even though we are unworthy of our name and God’s mercy, yet the prophet Isaiah fills us with hope: A bruised reed he shall not break and a smoldering wick he shall not quench (Isa 42:3).

Here the congregation is invited to see themselves as the Servant, working with God and challenging oppressive regimes through God’s grace. Though Romero engages in a typological reading of Isaiah 42—i.e. the Servant is the antitype for Christ—Romero extends that typology beyond Jesus to his congregation. In this way the Servant becomes an antitype for the congregation. The words of this scripture, then, are not historically distant or theologically constrained to references to Christ. Rather, as Romero preaches, he enacts the words of Isaiah 42 upon his congregation. “In El Salvador there is

112 Ibid. 5.
113 Ibid. 6.
114 In his study of Romero’s preaching, Edgardo Colón-Emeric argues that though Romero regularly presents Jesus as the “Father’s living sermon” (5), his preaching rarely ends with Jesus. Rather, “From the Christology of preaching, Romero turns to the ecclesiology of preaching. The Church is Christ’s best microphone. The Church can say with Isaiah, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.’ It can say with Jesus, ‘today this scripture is fulfilled’ on Sunday, January 27, 1980, in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at 8:00am” (Edgardo Colón-Emeric, “Microphones of Christ: Lessons from the Pulpit of Oscar Romero,” Homiletic Vol 42 No 2 (2017)3-14, 7).
still the possibility of making ourselves anew. We can still light the lamp of our faith and hope.”\textsuperscript{115}

At the same time, Romero recognizes that more than his congregation are listening to this sermon. His preaching is overheard by Salvadoran government officials. Here, rather than employing a more hidden transcript, Romero directly speaks to his oppressors and confronts them in his sermon: “I also want to thank the President of the Republic for the attention that he gives to my homilies. It has been said that when reporters asked him if he was aware of these threats he said that he became aware of this news because he had listened to my homily. Thank you very much, Mr. President, for listening to me.”\textsuperscript{116} This is a subversive rhetorical moment that presents the President as submissively attendant to Romero. Leaning into this open moment, Romero offers a litany of current events that, in light of government propaganda and oppression, need to be addressed truthfully and rectified justly.\textsuperscript{117} These moments name the people’s

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid. 6.
\textsuperscript{116} Romero continues, “I am also grateful for the offer that he made to me of providing me with protection if I asked for such protection. Yes, I am grateful for this offer but I also want to repeat my position here: I do not seek any advantage and the only thing that I desire is the good of my priests and my people. I would be willing to accept this offer if this would eliminate the slanders made against the priests that I spoke about before and if this would eliminate the campaigns of slander in our media where reporters are so confident to speak about such horrible things that there is no doubt there is some kind of a plot behind all of this, a plot that is very easy to figure out. I believe, however, that you yourself are able to transform and change this reality of slander” (Romero 10-11).
\textsuperscript{117} Colón-Emeric observes that Romero regularly offers a description of current events in his preaching as a way to read the signs-of-the-times and as opportunities for truth-telling (8-9).
experience of grief and loss. They appeal to the oppressors to repent. And, this litany of
current events advocates for the congregation to resist\textsuperscript{118} and hope.\textsuperscript{119}

Notably, before Romero preached this sermon on January 14, 1979, “Plácido Erdozain and Rutilio Sánchez spoke to the people of El Salvador in the name of the priests in the Archdiocese.”\textsuperscript{120} The Salvadoran government falsely listed ten priests as part of the guerrillero movement in El Salvador and sought to defame them in a way that endangered their lives.\textsuperscript{121} In response to this slander and to the death threats on Romero’s life, the priests “renewed their solidarity with the Archbishop of San Salvador, Bishop Oscar A. Romero.”\textsuperscript{122} They willingly became maligned ministers—suffering servants of El Salvador. This pledge was no resolution to suffer passively and die. Rather, like Romero, these suffering servants of El Salvador vowed to speak truth to power, advocate

\textsuperscript{118} For instance, Romero preaches: “I want to tell you that in the statement of the President there is something that greatly concerns me. The President said: \textit{What has happened is that certain members of the clergy have been surprised by the authorities because they were in places where they should not have been. This has also occurred in other parts of the world where some sick minds that appear to be healthy allow themselves to be taken in by doctrines and principles that are not Christian. I believe that there is a danger here because things are assumed to be certain that have not been proven. Many priests have been expelled and arrested and tortured. When Bishop Chávez and his unworthy successor have asked for explanations and reasons, no response has been given and events appear to be over and done. The most ambiguous case is that of our beloved brother Father Neto Barrera and here we are unable to do anything more then what we have done: highlight the fact that the Security Forces assassinated the only witness who could have explained this situation. How are we going to know whether or not the statement of the President is true when he accuses the clergy of being in places where they should not be?” (Romero 12).

\textsuperscript{119} As Romero preaches: “We are happy to see that the Pope, through his efforts at mediation between Chile and Argentina, has been able to avoid war. This fact gives us hope that God will not allow the awakened Church to fail. Let us trust in the Church! Let us gather around this Church that is in solidarity with the people!” (Romero 13).

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. 1.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 1.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid. 1.
for the people, and trust in God’s grace and deliverance. In this way, Romero extends the office of the Suffering Servant beyond Cyrus, beyond Christ, beyond the bishop, beyond even the priests. All are invited to live as God’s suffering servants, challenging the systemic oppression of people and proclaiming God’s liberating justice. As Romero concludes, “Christ has made us participants in his messianic dignity and wants this dignity to shine forth in the midst of the great social problems of our nation. So be it.”

Romero’s preaching of Isaiah 42 makes clear that it is in the interest of oppressive regimes for preachers to interpret the text with solely historical or christological connections. These moves keep the message of the scriptural witness at a safe distance. Furthermore, limiting the text’s referent to only one figure—whether historical or contemporary—limits the challenge to a domination system. If Romero had claimed to be the Suffering Servant—or if only the 10 priests had claimed this role—then the Salvadoran government could have easily controlled the resistance. But what Romero preaches is what Isaiah 42 preaches: The God of the great deliverances of old is present here, speaking here, offering here an open call for all those who would resist oppression and co-labor with God in bringing liberating justice to the world.

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123 “This should lead us to give thanks to God for the fact that there have always been pastors concerned about an evangelization that is attuned to the needs of our time” (Romero 13).
124 Colón-Emeric observes that Romero’s preaching voice sounds like many voices—not just his own. For Romero, “The voice crying in the wilderness is always part of a chorus” (11). This preaching en conjunto meant for Romero that, “The people were his prophets. He preached to them and they preached to him” (12).
125 Romero 13.
3.3. Empowering Testimony—Isaiah 49:1-6

A noticeable shift occurs from chapter 42 to chapter 49. While Isaiah 49—55 continues to speak about deliverance from captivity, “there is no mention of Babylon, nor is there the kind of explicit reference to deliverance from a political entity that is found in chapters 41-48.” References to Cyrus also disappear. The one once called “shepherd” (44:28), “anointed” (45:1), and “aroused in righteousness” (45:13)—the one some commentators think is the servant, is no longer discussed in Isaiah 49—55. For this reason Shalom Paul argues, “From chap. 49 onward the prophecies are set within Jerusalem and reflect the situation of the nation after the return from Babylon.” Other scholars continue to locate these chapters in exile, but in either setting the situation is apparently discouraging. As Blenkinsopp concludes, “we have entered a phase in which it has become evident that the Iranian [Cyrus] has not lived up to expectations, that he was not about to discharge the tasks assigned to him—namely, to set prisoners free (42:7; 45:13) and rebuild Jerusalem with its temple and the Judean towns destroyed by the

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127 Paul 321. Paul also notes other language shifts: “there is no mention of the exclusiveness and unity of the Deity, no polemic against idolatry and their worshippers, no mention of judicial proceedings against the nations, and no arguments for God’s omniscience and omnipotence as proven by His work in history and nature…Furthermore, the two names, ‘Jacob and Israel,’ oft-repeated in chaps. 40—48, do not feature here at all, except for 49:5, 6” (321).
Babylonians (44:26, 28; 45:13)." Given the public and hidden transcript of Isaiah 42, perhaps this conclusion is not so surprising.

It is in this altered, ambiguous, yet discouraging setting, that Second Isaiah proclaims another word of the Servant. Baltzer finds the character of this text "cryptic." The issue that he and other commentators seem to have with this speech is best described by Brueggemann: "The most likely interpretation is to regard the servant as Israel, as is the case elsewhere in exilic Isaiah. There is, however, a major obstacle to such a sense, because in verses 5-6 the servant has a ministry to Israel, so that it could not be Israel as servant to Israel." Nevertheless, Israel speaking to Israel is a problem primarily for those who seek a rigid, historical identification of the Servant or for those who want to find here a reason to posit the rise of a christ-like figure. Neither of these hermeneutic interests fit the poetic, proclamatory approach taken by Isaiah 49:1-6.

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129 Blenkinsopp 300.
130 Baltzer 306. Baltzer later suggests that we understand this text as a dialogue form that is a part of Baltzer’s proposed “ideal biography” source for Second Isaiah (306).
132 By contrast, what David Clines writes of Isaiah 53 might also be said here: “What if the force of the poem—to say nothing of the poetry of the poem—lies in its very unforthcomingness, its refusal to be precise and to give information, its stubborn concealment of the kind of data that critical scholarship yearns to get its hands on as the building-blocks for the construction of it hypothesis?” (David Clines, I, He, We, & They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53. JSOT Supplement Series 1, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976) 25). Such an open, poetic reading is also supported by Brueggemann, who writes, “it is enough to see that Yahweh has designated some human agent to be about the work of healing and emancipation in the world with particular reference to Israel. Such an approach permits us to attend to the text and to forgo questions of historical identity that in any case did not seem to interest the poet” (110).
133 For instance, Reed Lessing: “The main idea, then, is this. The servant people need the individual suffering servant to reconcile them to Yahweh and do what they are unable to accomplish” (Reed Lessing, “Isaiah’s Servants in Chapters 40–55: Clearing Up the Confusion” Concordia Journal (Spring 2011): 130-134, 132).
Other scholars point to a different way of interpreting the text. Some find that Second Isaiah uses embodiment here to communicate a message. Others find Isa 49:1-6 leading the hearer to discern between disparate voices and perspectives. Some see the preacher addressing a broad audience, yet perhaps speaking most powerfully to a smaller group who is willing to identify themselves in the space left open by the preacher’s ambiguity, responding faithfully. Uta Schmidt asserts that the preacher personifies the Servant here, just as another voice personifies Zion in Isa 49:14-26. Read in this way, the Servant is not presented to the hearer as a specific person but as a way to respond to present difficulties. As Schmidt describes this message, “the Servant tells about his

134 As Chris Seitz observes, “The servant embodies the hopes associated with Israel, and in particular with Israel vis-à-vis the nations” (Christopher Seitz, “You Are My Servant, You Are the Israel in Whom I Will Be Glorified”: The Servant Songs and the Effect of Literary Context in Isaiah,” Calvin Theological Journal 39 (2004): 117-134, 133).
135 “Thus meaning is to be found not in the separate truth of an overarching theme but in the ongoing event of deliberation over the meaning of the unfolding story of god, Jerusalem, and the world around” (Patricia Tull, “One Book, Many Voices: Conceiving of Isaiah’s Polyphonic Message” 279-314 in “As Those Who Are Taught”: The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL. Claire Mathews McGinnis and Patricia Tull, eds., (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006) 313).
136 As Davis writes for contemporary readers: “The ambiguity [of the Servant’s identity] is meaningful and essential to our understanding. No single answer suffices, because no faith, no ethnic group or nation has an exclusive or permanent claim to that privilege and responsibility of witnessing to Abraham’s God through weakness and suffering. Isaiah ultimately speaks to and for all those who offer such a witness” (Davis, “Revelation in Israel” 31).
137 As Ellen Davis observes, “The prophet’s speech begins ostensibly as a public proclamation to the coastlands and nations—presumably, all those places where Judeans (Jews) have gone into exile. But it quickly becomes something more like a stage whisper; the prophet seems to be speaking to himself and to the relatively few perhaps who overhear and take heed” (Davis, “Revelation in Israel” 30-1).
138 Schmidt writes: “The Servant is spoken about like a person, but he stands for more: he stands for a certain kind of relationship with God; he stands for a certain way to react, and for a certain kind of people who might do so. Thus, Isa 49,1-13 is not about the Servant as one very special person who understood YHWH better that [sic] anyone else. It is about one kind of future: This is proposed as one way how life for the people of
fate, his task and his unshaken trust in God, and in all this he tells about the turning point caused by YHWH—‘now!’”

To a homiletical ear, this sounds a lot like preaching as testimony. For instance, when Anna Carter-Florence describes such preaching she names it as “disruptive,” “liminal,” “prophetic,” and “embodied.” As Isaiah 49:1 preaches, “The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.” Carter Florence also asserts that testimony is not perception but report; it “gives something to be interpreted and, at the same time, calls for an interpretation.” Preaching as testimony offers “claim and confession rather than absolute and certitude.” It responds to an

Israel could develop after destruction and oppression, after living in exile or living poorly in the destroyed land” (Uta Schmidt, “Servant and Zion: Two Kinds of Future in Isaiah 49” 85-91 in “My Spirit at Rest in the North Country” (Zechariah 6:8): Collected Communications to the XXth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Helsinki 2010. Hermann Michael Niemann and Matthias Augustin, eds., (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011) 89). Schmidt’s larger argument is that Isaiah 49 uses personification to present two viable options to the hearer for responding to their present difficult circumstances: “The Zion-model takes serious the experience of utter suffering, loneliness, and abandonment. The Servant-model assumes a positive and trusting attitude in spite of suffering. So Isa 49 provides two different models for a relationship with YHWH which will prove sustainable for the future” (Schmidt 90).

Catrin Williams argues that the author of John saw Second Isaiah as a testimony calling forth testimony from others, like John the Baptist, who “came as a witness to testify to the light” (Catrin Williams, “The Testimony of Isaiah and Johannine Community” 107-125 in “As Those Who Are Taught”: The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL. Claire Mathews McGinnis and Patricia Tull, eds., (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006) 111). Williams continues, “in these first narrative sections of the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist is depicted as one who embodies the Isaianic voice in the wilderness and who allusively takes up Isaianic prophecies about the Servant as the content of his testimony” (112).

Carter Florence, Preaching as Testimony 56-7.

Ibid. 62-3.

Ibid. 65.
encounter with the divine, but does not close off further conversation. Listen to Second Isaiah preaching:

And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” But I said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God (Isa 49:3-4).

Carter Florence adds further, “Testimony insists that we change the subject of preaching from ourselves and our words to God’s Word as it moves through life and text.” It endeavors to keep the hearer focused, honest, grounded, engaged, and going. Notice how the preacher ends the message in Isa 49:6: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Indeed, in many ways, Carter Florence’s analysis of preaching testimony provides an apt description of Second Isaiah’s preaching in 49:1-6.

This connection can be seen more clearly through the lens of Lucy Atkinson Rose’s homiletic. She describes preaching as a word of testimony meant to guide further conversation and response. Its content is “tentative, incomplete, particular, and negotiable.” The language of this preaching is confessional and polyvalent, and its

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144 Ibid. 131,
145 Ibid. 131-2.
146 Rose describes the purpose of preaching as being “to gather the community of faith around the Word in order to foster and refocus its central conversations” (Lucy Atkinson Rose. Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 98).
147 Rose 107. Rose asserts—in contradistinction to the approaches championed by John Broadus, Karl Barth, and Fred Craddock—that the preacher and congregation are equal partners in one community of faith and that language is never innocent or unambiguous (91).
148 Ibid. 110.
form is “a recharging of the preacher’s journey toward meaning” or “story”—forms that relinquish control of the sermon’s reception.  

Most significant for our understanding of Isaiah 49:1-6, Rose describes five characteristics of the heart of preaching that offers a testimonial word that guides conversation and response. First, such preaching is communal. It is offered in the context of the priesthood of all believers. Second, it evinces the absence of hierarchy. The preacher should see their role as “ensuring that preaching occurs” and encouraging other’s proclamation. Third, such preaching should be personal and/or autobiographical in nature. Fourth, its goal is inclusiveness, which is achieved by evoking the experience of others, reflecting multiple life experiences, welcoming a variety of personal responses, and engaging in actual conversation. Finally, this style of preaching characteristically approaches scripture conversationally. “Conversational preaching seeks to nurture the reading of Scripture as conversation between the community of faith and texts about matters of ultimate importance.”

What Rose offers us here is a clear rubric for understanding preaching as a word of testimony to guide further conversation and response. She also gives us a helpful lens for interpreting the message of Isaiah 49:1-6 as testimony that seeks to empower the hearer. Note, for instance, that within the genre of preaching as testimony, “I,” “me,” and “my” can mean “we,” “us,” and “our.” A singular voice and story evoke corporate

149 Ibid. 117.
150 Ibid. 121.
151 Ibid. 123.
152 Ibid. 125.
153 Ibid. 130.
154 Ibid. 131.
witness. Also, within the genre of testimony one might speak to a religious community (e.g. Israel/church) about religious community. Thus, the church can have a mission to the church in response to the witness—or Israel to Israel.

More specific to Rose’s insights, the preacher in Isaiah 49:1-6 can be seen as participating in each of the five rubrics for preaching as a word of testimonial conversation. First, Second Isaiah’s preaching in 49:1-6 engages the community and seeks to enable their response by appealing to a broad audience (“coastlands” 49:1), acknowledging different perspectives within the testimony (49:3-4), and by appealing to “Jacob and Israel” (49:3, 5-6). Second, through use of the ambiguous, though collective sobriquet, “servant,” the preacher creates an opening in the testimony for hearers to insert their own presence and voice (49:3). Third, the servant-testimony gives the preaching here a personal, autobiographical nature. The preacher tells the congregation about being called by YHWH from within the womb (49:1, 5), experiencing doubt and frustration (49:4), yet finding renewed strength and hope (49:4b, 5b). Fourth, this testimony evokes the experience of others. The preacher’s prenatal life, allusions to biblical call stories (described below), expression of doubt and hope, and future mission of “light” to the ends of the earth (49:6) lead the hearer to reflect on their own experiences, faith, and mission. Finally, the preaching in Isaiah 49:1-6 engages scripture conversationally by incorporating it into the form of personal testimony. Thus by reading Isaiah 49:1-6 in these homiletical ways, we gain a hermeneutical lens that helps navigate the challenges of this particular text while also providing an entry for appreciating the ways in which Second Isaiah preaches the older testament.
The second Servant Song opens with the preacher calling to the “coastlands” and to “peoples from far away” (Isa 49:1a). On the one hand, this is an invitation to exiled Judeans155 and perhaps others156 far beyond those who would hear the preacher’s voice. On the other hand, the preacher begins by showing her hearers that these words include many people, far and near. This openness to others extends through what sounds like a very personal experience: “The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me” (49:1b). Yet, this verse alludes to and is in dialogue with many other call stories, including Israel’s call within Second Isaiah.157 That YHWH “calls” may also point to pentateuchal narratives where, qara (“to call”) “has Moses as the exclusive object” (Exod 3:4; 19:3, 20; 24:16; Lev 1:1).158 Further, the reference to the womb echoes the witness of Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5). This prenatal calling may also allude to God’s pronouncement over Jacob and Esau while they were still in Rebekah’s womb.159 Such a connection is strengthened by the preacher’s later use of “Jacob/Israel” (49:3,5,6). At the same time, the preacher may be in dialogue with broader call narratives from the ancient near eastern world that are known to his hearers. For instance, Shalom Paul compares the preacher’s words to an

155 Brueggemann considers that peoples far away may refer to Jews scattered in all the earth (Isaiah 40–66 110).
156 Baltzer notes that “coastlands” refers to the ends of the earth, which is Greek speaking world to the west (306).
157 Compare the call in 41:9 (to Israel); 42:6 (to Israel); and in 43:1(to Jacob/Israel).
158 Baltzer 307.
159 Genesis 25:23: “And the LORD said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.’”
inscription about Nabonidus: “The gods ordained his rule while still in the womb of his mother.”\textsuperscript{160} He also notes that the expression, “named me,” is “the inter dialectical etymological and semantic equivalent of Akk. šumam zakāru, which appears in these royal inscriptions describing the divine preordination of kings.”\textsuperscript{161} The cumulative rhetorical impact of these connections is that in the voice of the servant’s testimony the congregation is empowered to hear many voices, many calls, including perhaps their own.

As the testimony continues it adds more voices and perspectives. While the line, “He made my mouth like a sharp sword…he made me a polished arrow” (49:2), may speak of an individual’s experience,\textsuperscript{162} it also evokes events from the life of Moses. Of course, a sharp tongue is a sharp contrast to Moses’ lament that he was not a good speaker (Exod 4:10-16). And yet, the later Song of Moses celebrates deliverance wrought via God’s sword and arrow, which implies Moses’ mouth and person (Deut 32:39-43). In the end, despite Moses’ lament and Aaron’s help, Moses does find the words needed to lead a slave revolt that results in liberation from Egyptian domination.\textsuperscript{163} In light of the

\textsuperscript{160} Paul 323.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid. 324. Still Paul sees distinctions here: “Despite the literary and thematic similarities between Jeremiah, the Mesopotamian kings, and the servant, there are two major differences: As opposed to Jeremiah, who was an individual chosen as ‘a prophet to the nations,’ Israel was chosen to be a prophet-nation; and as opposed to the Babylonian and Assyrian kings, who were preordained to rule the nations of the world, Israel was chosen for a spiritual destiny, to be ‘a light unto the nations’” (Paul 323).
\textsuperscript{162} In another possible ANE connection Shalom Paul notes that Gilgamesh laments Enkidu’s death by saying that he was “the sword in my belt” (Paul 324, citing VIII.i.5; \textit{CAD} N/1:246).
\textsuperscript{163} Baltzer also sees here a connection between the servant’s mouth and holy war (307). He compares the implications of 49:2 with Exod 17:8-13 where Moses’ hands are upheld (in prayer?) ensuring the defeat of Amalek. Note that this text also arose as a possible influence for the first Servant Song wherein the servant was said to be “upheld” (42:1).
widespread recognition of the implicit portrayal of a “second exodus” in Isa 40–55, the testimony of Isa 49:2 becomes not merely an echo of the voice of an earlier prophet but an evocation of the paradigmatic prophet of liberation that summons the people/hearers to participate in this same liberative mission.164

On the idea of a mouth like a sharp sword, Shalom Paul understands here something more like a knife that can be concealed, rather than a sword.165 Paul compares this little sword to the flint knives that Joshua made for circumcision (Josh 5:3) or to Ehud’s dagger that was concealed on his hip before assassinating King Eglon (Judg 3:16). This sharp mouth is something little that can bring about transformation spiritually and politically. Blenkinsopp notes that the metaphor of mouth as sword “connotes the power of incisive speech, the power to persuade and incite to action, to make a decisive difference in the political sphere.”166 Note here the pun: in Hebrew the word for a sword’s “blade” can also mean “mouth.” Thus the preacher proclaims that YHWH is putting this sharp power in the mouth of the servant. As God did with Moses, Joshua, Ehud, and, more recently, with Jeremiah,167 so God is doing with the servant.

164 Dell sees here a contrast to Isa 42:2 “where the servant is not to raise his voice” (Katherine Dell, “The Suffering Servant of Deuter-on-Isaiah: Jeremiah Revisited” 119-134 in Genesis, Isaiah, and Psalms: A Festschrift to Honor Professor John Emerton for his Eightieth Birthday, Graham Davies, Katherine Dell, et al, eds., (Boston: Brill, 2010), 129). In this sense the preacher as servant is offering testimony to her own experience. However, given the rhetoric of Isaiah 42, generally, and the possible hidden transcript, specifically, I find it a stretch to think of the preacher or the servant as unable to speak in the first Servant Song.
165 Paul 324.
166 Blenkinsopp 300. Sword and arrow is used as a metaphor for sharp rhetoric in Ps 57:4 (5 Heb.): “I lie down among lions that greedily devour human prey; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords.”
167 Katherine Dell argues that the reference to mouth as sword and arrow in Isa 49:2 “is a reminder of the commissioning of Jeremiah, where in 1:6 he does not know how to speak
This connection to God’s action becomes even more transformative because in 49:3, the preacher testifies to God’s word: Israel is YHWH’s servant. Again, this testimony sounds like an individual’s experience of theophany. Yet, unless we posit that “Israel” is the preacher’s name, the theophany reaches far beyond any lone figure. Compare Isa 41:8 where God says that Israel is “my servant,” and follows it up with the line: “the offspring of Abraham, my friend.” In both cases an apparently private moment of revelation has wide-reaching implications. To use Lucy Rose’s words, this testimony is both “particular” and “negotiable;” it is “confessional” and “polyvalent.” It sounds like one person’s experience, yet it invites many to voice their own experience of hearing this word from God.

Whoever hears this word from YHWH is one through whom God will be “glorified” (49:3b). Of the thirteen occurrences of the verbal form of this word, nine are found in Isaiah. In nearly every case, this verb refers to groups of people or to the glory God receives through a group of people. It is not applied to an individual in the book of Isaiah. Interestingly, later Jewish tradition underscores the wide embrace of this

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168 This passage also presents a connection with coastlands in Isa 41:1-5.
169 Rose 107.
170 Ibid. 110.
171 A form of the word “glorified” is used in Isaiah to chastise foreign powers who glorify themselves over God (10:15), to celebrate the redemption of Jacob/Israel (44:23), to explain why nations shall run to Israel (55:5), to describe God’s house (60:7), to explain why ships of Tarshish will bring “your children” and riches to Israel (60:9), to detail the way Lebanon will use its lumber to beautify the sanctuary (60:13), to express the glory God will receive through the thriving shoot, Israel (60:21), and to portray Israel as a grove of oaks displaying God’s glory (61:3).
testimony to God’s theophany. What rabbis read is what Second Isaiah’s congregation may have heard: the preacher’s words are our words. Her theophany is mine. The servant’s calling is the calling of Israel.

As the testimony continues, the preacher notes the presence of a counter witness to YHWH’s word: “But I said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God” (49:4). Here the preacher sounds notes of doubt and despair marked by strong rhetoric: spent strength, “nothing” (tōhû, “chaos”), and “vanity” (hebēl, “empty chasing”).

Shalom Paul reads this as though the preacher says, “God may have ‘said to me’ that I was His servant (v. 3), but I thought…that all my striving was in vain.” Brueggemann adds that the preacher is acknowledging “that enactment of the mission has been a failure and concluding that the mission is futile (v. 4a).” This may be the preacher’s own experience, but it is surely also the experience of many in Israel who had hoped for a better outcome from the change to the Persian regime. In other words, this too is testimony that invites testimony from the congregation. It makes space for the preacher’s hearers to add their own expressions of doubt and despair, or at least to nod in agreement.

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172 Haggadic reading presents Isa 49:3 as words spoken by “the holy spirit” in response to collective Israel’s testimony about God: “Thou art the glory of their strength” (Ps 89:18) (The Book of Legends 335:16). Another Haggadic reading applies God’s pronunciation in Isa 49:3 to anyone who studies Torah (The Book of Legends 434:306).

173 Janzen argues, “Given that hebēl is frequently used to characterize other gods and especially their idols, it is as though the servant here verges on the suspicion that service of YHWH is just as futile as the service of other gods” (J. Gerald Janzen, “Ecce Homo: The Servant of YHWH as Imago Dei in Second Isaiah” Canadian Theological Review Vol 2, no. 3 (2013):1-14, 10).

174 Paul 325. Note here that the preacher adds the first-person singular pronoun for emphasis.

175 Brueggemann, Isaiah 40–66 111.
This sermon, however, does not intend to leave its hearers wallowing in despair. With a strong turn away from antithesis to synthesis, the preacher proclaims, “yet surely!” “Yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God” (49:4b). Here the preacher begins to invite the congregation to look for a different way—a way to strive toward hope. Echoing Rashbam’s interpretation, Paul asserts that we should read “yet surely” as “it is indeed thus, and not as I expected.” The use of “yet surely” points back to God’s earlier work and promises. Here the preacher actually speaks not of “cause” and “reward” but of justice and work. He preaches, yet surely my mišpāṭ is with YHWH. The mission of liberating justice as proclaimed in the first Servant Song is reclaimed here. So too, the preacher’s mention of “reward” points to the larger work of God’s deliverance and care for Israel. Consider Isaiah 40:10-11:

> See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward [“wage”] is with him, and his recompense [“work”] before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

The root of the word translated as “reward” (לעפָע) typically means “work.” Indeed, this is the way Second Isaiah most frequently employs the term. Thus, the preacher’s

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178 Paul 325.
179 Compare Isa 41:24 (“your work is nothing at all”); Isa 44:12 (“The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers and forging it with his strong arm”); Isa 45:9 (“Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making”? or “Your work has no handles”?); and Isa 62:11, which repeats the last two lines of 40:10.
testimony in 49:4 reaffirms God’s liberating and nurturing work and recommits to working for justice. And, because this testimony points to work and commitments far beyond the scope of any lone figure, here too the preacher’s words are meant to invite congregational response. The preacher leads the congregation to testify: “Though we know doubt, yet surely God is working, So we will continue to seek justice.”

The preaching spurs Israel to give up despair and to live into Israel’s promise and mission. In verse 5, the preacher returns to the womb metaphor and all its resonances with Jacob, Moses, and Jeremiah—figureheads for Israel. The sermon also subtly invites the congregation of Israel to change their outlook and actions. A form of the word shuv (“to repent”) appears in verse 5 (“to bring back”) and in verse 6 (“to restore”). As the preacher sounds these notes of repentance, she invites the congregation to embrace the kind of change that the entire sermon has worked toward: turning from despair toward the work of return and active restoration.

Next, the preacher undergirds this call for Israel to change by pointing to the grace of God’s glory and strength (49:5b). ḳāḇēḏ, here translated as “honored,” plays a significant role in the book of Exodus. Pharaoh’s heart is often hardened (a form of kābad) against following God’s call to set the Hebrew slaves free. But YHWH, who is

(“Say to daughter Zion, ‘See, your salvation comes; his reward [“wage”] is with him, and his recompense before him.’”).

Note a Haggadic reading uses this verse as the testimony of Rabbi Abbahu: “At the time of R. Abbahu’s death, thirteen rivers of balsam passed in front of him. When he asked, ‘For whom are these?’ and was told, ‘For you,’ he said, ‘All these for Abbahu? Yet to me, all my labor seemed useless, my strength worn out in vain. But my case rested with the Lord’ (Isa 49:4). For in this world the Holy One shows the righteous their reward, so that their soul is satisfied, and they go to sleep peacefully” (The Book of Legends 292:491).

See Exod 8:15; 8:32; 9:7; and 9:34.
committed to liberation, announces that YHWH will gain glory (kāvad) by overcoming Egyptian domination.\(^{182}\) So too, the preacher announces, the one who joins God in this present work of return and restoration will be gloried/honored (49:5). Such a one will also find strength for the task. The reference in Isa 49:5 to “strength” may also point to the book of Exodus: “The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him” (15:2).\(^{183}\) Here, with subtle homiletical allusions, the preacher reminds her hearers that the God of the exodus—the God who made, called, and liberated Israel—will empower them again for the work to which they are now called.

Such work will indeed be daunting. The preacher calls for her hearers to “bring Jacob back to YHWH,” “gather Israel,” “raise up the tribes of Jacob,” and “restore the survivors.” Brueggemann describes this task as “to end exile and bring Israel home.”\(^{184}\) Blenkinsopp, however, rightly sees the broader scope and deeper intention of this work, for it involves “reintegration,” “return to the land,” “physical restoration,” and “moral regeneration.”\(^{185}\) Baltzer adds that the text invites a different political vision of what it

\(^{182}\) See Exod 14:4, “I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD” and Exod 14:17, “Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.”

\(^{183}\) Compare Isa 12:2, which sounds similar to Exod 15:2: “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.” Note, Shalom Paul argues that we not read “strength” here as in the MT, but should follow the Qumran scroll, 1QIsa\(^a\), which reads “my help” (Paul 326). While I am not convinced that a change is needed (though my homiletic imagination likes the opening to inject the hymn line, “Here I raise mine Ebenezer” into the preaching), it is clear that in both readings YHWH has, is, and will help Israel to be Israel.

\(^{184}\) Brueggemann, Isaiah 40—66 112.

\(^{185}\) Blenkinsopp 301. 1QIsa\(^a\) reads “my help” instead of “my strength” (Paul 326).
means to be Israel—no longer will there be a king, but the “tribes of Jacob” will rise up (49:6). These kinds of changes for the nation of Israel have such a grand scope, such a spiritual depth, such a communal focus, and such a political agenda that it is difficult to imagine any one person being able to accomplish them on their own. This undertaking is beyond even the aggrandizements of ancient near eastern kings! Thus, it is better to understand this call as the work of a group of people committing together to both be transformed and to transform their community. And, if we continue reading the second song as preaching testimony that invites Israel’s testimony, then it follows that the commissioning here would be for all of the preacher’s hearers.

And, the preacher offers one more word that pushes for a communal reading of the servant’s task. The sermon concludes where it began—with a word from God. This time, God announces, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6). While it is worthwhile to focus on “light” and “salvation” here, let us not miss the universal scope of the servant’s mission. As

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186 Baltzer is argues that “raise up the tribes of Jacob” is “an eminently political statement, for it takes up the prenational, premonarchical traditions of the tribal league…This shows how consistently DtIsa carries through his antidynastic line of argument” (Baltzer 310). Blenkinsopp also notes the political nature of this verse, though in relation to Persia rather than older Israelite tradition: “This is political language, a political manifesto which declares, in effect, that the task of bringing about the will of Israel’s God in the political sphere that Cyrus was unwilling to perform will now be undertaken by Israel itself by means of its prophetic representative” (Blenkinsopp 300).

187 For instance, Baltzer finds a connection between light, justice and torah (compare Isa 51:4-6); he then ponders whether the mission is to bring torah to all the world (311). Shalom Paul notes that light is “a metaphor for salvation,” thus he reads the last half of verse 6 as a poetic parallel (327). Brueggemann asserts that “‘Light’ is the antithesis of darkness, disorder, and chaos” just as “‘salvation’ is the counter to oppression, exploitation, and despair” (Isaiah 40—66 112). Blenkinsopp observes, somewhat ominously that “salvation” in Isaiah 49—66 is connected with šēḏāqāh (51:6, 8; 56:1; 59:17; 62:1) meaning “triumph” or “victory”; and “the essence of this work of salvation
Brueggemann states, “at its largest, this is a vision for a renewed world for all peoples.”\textsuperscript{188} For similar expressions of universal reach of salvation compare Isa 48:20; 42:10; 43:6. The mission here is global in scope—or at least it stretches from the Greek coastlands in the West to the farthest reaches of the Persian empire in the East. In other words, the preacher announces that God’s call to the servant is bigger than anything Cyrus has accomplished. It is also bigger than what Cyrus has already accomplished, for the goal is not to conquer nations but to transform them.\textsuperscript{189} Such work invites humility. Who can transform nations and bring light and salvation except God?\textsuperscript{190} Indeed, this mission is God’s work. The preacher announces that YHWH “will give” the servant for light and salvation to the nations. At the same time, the preacher invites servant Israel to live into their identity which was first announced to Abraham. “Israel’s mission is to be a source of blessing for all peoples; God’s charge to Abraham—‘Be a blessing!’ (Genesis 12:2)—is here reiterated in exile.”\textsuperscript{191} Thus, the preacher calls Israel to be Israel for the sake of restoring the people and for the salvation of the world.

\textsuperscript{188} Brueggemann, \textit{Isaiah 40–66} 112.
\textsuperscript{190} “The prophet witnesses to the reality that mission is not human work; it is God’s work, and no small part of it is done precisely in and through human weakness and suffering” (Davis, “Revelation in Israel” 31).
\textsuperscript{191} Davis, “Revelation in Israel” 31.
Reading the second Servant Song as preaching testimony offers us three main insights. First, it gives the reader a way to address one of the exegetical puzzles of Isaiah 49:1-6—how is the servant still Israel when the servant is in mission to Israel? The testimonial form uses first person, singular pronouns but with the intention of addressing the community. To be clear, the preacher does not address all Israel. Rather, she addresses her congregation among the Judahite exiles and asks them to join in the undertaking to be about a different way of being Israel in response to their exilic circumstances. Thus the preacher draws on Israel’s traditions and tropes to speak to a portion of Israel. In this way the preacher has Israel testify to Israel.\footnote{In a similar way, when J.J. Warren spoke on the floor of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church 2019 he spoke as a Methodist to Methodist’s about the way Methodist’s should be in relation to gay members and leaders like himself. At a pinnacle moment of his speech, Warren discusses his ministry on campus to the LGBTQ community, especially: “We have brought people to Jesus because they have not heard this message before. They didn’t know God could love them, because their churches said God didn’t. And so if we can be a church which brings Jesus to people who are told can’t be loved—that’s what I want our church to be. And that’s the Methodist church that I love and that I want to be a pastor in one day. I want to be a pastor in the Methodist church, cause I love our tradition. I love all of you. We are the church together. [Pointing to the body and to himself] This is the body of Christ and we are stronger together than we are apart” (https://youtu.be/t7dMVbmHMpk, accessed April 2, 2019).} The preacher invites the congregation to remember Jacob/Israel and how God spoke for a nation even when in the womb; remember God called Moses in a foreign land; remember Jeremiah who was called before he was born (49:1,5). Hear the word of the Lord: ‘You are my servant, Israel” (49:3). Testimonial preaching sounds personal and autobiographical. At the same time, the preacher’s “I” intends to evoke the congregation’s “Aye.” It invites the hearer to read-in their own life and experience, welcoming a variety of personal responses. Thus the preacher of the second Song testifies: “But I said, “I have labored in
vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God” (49:4). In all these ways, the preacher uses testimony to engage Israel’s range of fear, hope, doubt, despair, and trust. As the sermon closes it becomes clear that the intention of this testimony is for Israel to engage in further conversation and action about what Israel can be in relation to itself and in relation to the world. In the words of Anna Carter Florence, the testimony in Isa 49:1-6 “gives something to be interpreted and, at the same time, calls for an interpretation.”

In her sermon, “Laboring in Vain,” Barbara Brown Taylor captures well how this testimonial hermeneutic looks in contemporary sermonic form. Here she highlights the interplay between God, the preacher, and the congregation in the Second Servant Song. As she begins her sermon she observes:

> Like an actor who loves the play he is in so much that he can recite every line of it, Isaiah jumps from part to part. Sometimes when he says ‘I’ he is speaking for himself. Sometimes he is speaking for God. And more than once he speaks for an unidentified servant of God, someone who was chosen by God and who suffered for it.

As Taylor continues, she notes that “servant” evokes many possible identifications—Jesus, Isaiah, Israel, or another person or nation. And, she claims “servant” also includes her congregation. With this approach, Taylor leans into the cues in the text for homiletical gain. What Second Isaiah does in preaching this Song, Taylor does in preaching from this Song.

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195 Taylor 174.
196 Ibid. 176.
The body of Taylor’s sermon plays off of the servant’s testimony. Sometimes she will speak about the servant as a collective referring to the congregation:

> It is either a case of divine irony or else God knows something we servants do not know, namely, that our success does not depend on those who are chosen but on the one who chooses them, the Holy One of Israel, in whose hand the sharp sword cannot fail to dazzle, in whose bow the polished arrow cannot fail to find its mark.”\(^{197}\)

At other times, Taylor will seem to make observations about an historical, servant figure:

> He had thought it was enough for him to do his duty, to do the particular tasks God had set before him, tasks at which he labored and labored until he had no strength left. He came to the end of his rope. He admitted defeat, and that is when God had some room to negotiate.\(^{198}\)

Yet, the beauty of Taylor’s approach is that she neither allows the congregation's testimony nor the historical, servant’s testimony to dominate. Her listeners are led to hear “I” as a reference to the text’s speaker, but also to themselves (their own “I”), and to many other “I’s” within the congregation and beyond.

So too, Taylor uses testimonial forms to articulate good news in ways that echo her scripture. Like Second Isaiah, Taylor preaches about hearing God’s voice: “‘You just let your light shine and let me take care of the rest. I chose you and I’ve got good taste. I made you and I can be trusted.’”\(^{199}\) Also like Second Isaiah, Taylor highlights God’s work for her and her congregation in the past: “The Holy One of Israel has chosen us, has called us from our mothers’ wombs and named our names, giving us mouths like sharp swords, making us like polished arrows.”\(^{200}\)

\(^{197}\) Ibid. 176, emphasis added.
\(^{198}\) Ibid. 177.
\(^{199}\) Ibid. 177.
\(^{200}\) Ibid. 177.
As her sermon ends, Taylor links the missional call to God’s grace at work in her hearers’ lives. She tells her congregation, you are called "to ignite, enflame, combust, burn, shine with the glory of the God who has chosen you, and given you to the world, bright lights to the end of the earth." This final homiletic turn is clearly a call for the church to be in mission to the world. But it is also a call for the church to be in mission to the Church. Taylor wants her hearers to model to each other and to other church bodies a different way of being Christian—one not duty bound (more on this below) but committed to shining God’s grace.

Second, interpreting this Servant Song as preaching testimony models for us a way of preaching the older testament that is deeply conversant with scripture. In her book, *Prophetic Preaching*, Nora Tubbs Tisdale proposes ten approaches for preaching prophetically and pastorally. These include many approaches that the preacher in Isaiah 49:1-6 employs: “Standing in the Shoes of Another”, “Standing With the Congregation”, “Using a Congregation’s History as a Bridge to a Prophetic Vision for Its Future”, “Inviting Someone Personally Involved in the Concern to Participate in Preaching on It”, “Articulating the Opposing Viewpoint in a Manner That is Fair and Accurate”, and “Taking the Long View.” What all of these approaches hold in common is that they seek to foster deeper conversation. Turning to Second Isaiah, one finds the preacher inviting the congregation to imagine life through the perspectives of Jacob, Moses, and Jeremiah. Imagine life for Jacob, who is blessed by God while in the womb of a Chaldean

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201 Ibid. 178.
mother. Imagine life for Moses, who is called to action while his people are enslaved in a foreign land. Imagine life for Jeremiah, who is called in the womb while a foreign nation threatens to destroy Israel. The preacher uses this history to build a bridge for her despairing and frustrated congregation to envision a different future for Israel and for the world. By testifying in the voice of the tradition’s figure heads, the preacher also leads the congregation to participate in the preaching. While giving space for assent (49:3), and articulating dissent (49:4), the preacher seeks to foster a broader discussion in the congregation about what the older (pre-exilic) testament has to say about life in this (exilic) moment. That discussion centers around a homiletical question: Given who YHWH has been, given the situations experienced by those whom YHWH has called, what might we rightly expect YHWH to be and to initiate now?

A preacher who wants to engage the Old Testament in a way similar to the Second Servant Song might think of comparing and contrasting the congregation’s current outlook with that of an Old Testament figure or body of people within the Old Testament. Another option would be for the preacher to present contrasting perspectives from within the Old Testament. In many cases, contemporary Christian preachers will need to be more explicit about these figures and texts than Second Isaiah needed to be. Allusions will likely not suffice, but this is merely an opportunity to tell more of the story.

Beyond matters of form and content, if one wants to preach like Second Isaiah it is important to approach the older testament with Second Isaiah’s assumption that these older texts still speak in new circumstances. Israel in exile surely felt as far from the monarchical traditions as we might feel from the Old Testament today. And yet, Second
Isaiah continued to treat these older texts as that which offer a vital word for the present moment. Preaching the Old Testament well today requires the same outlook and commitment. However, preachers need to be careful with how we connect contemporary experience with the experience of figures in the Old Testament.

Third, reading the second Servant Song as preaching testimony shows us the real need for homiletical response to the realities of human suffering. Isaiah 49:1-6 spoke to (at least) the economic depression caused by Persian neglect and intensified by decades of Babylonian domination and marginalization. By acknowledging despair, Second Isaiah was able to lead the congregation to reflect on the ways in which God was calling them to work to change the circumstances of life for Israel. Specifically, the preacher calls for the congregation to “bring Jacob back to YHWH,” “gather Israel,” “raise up the tribes of Jacob,” and “restore the survivors.” When we do not read texts like the Second Song as speaking to address economic depression and other forms of domination we minimize scripture’s witness and diminish our own preaching of the Old Testament.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an amazing preacher by all accounts, but the one thing she does not do in her sermon on Isaiah 49 is engage Second Isaiah’s acknowledgment of doubt and despair. While Taylor does name frustrations and weariness, her take on the servant’s experience differs strikingly from the devastation in and behind the exilic preacher’s words. Obviously, Taylor's congregation is not experiencing the same things as Second Isaiah’s congregation. Still, something significant is lost when preachers refer to exile as only an aspect of white, American, middle class malaise. That move might

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203 Taylor 176-7.
connect with some hearers, but it drops out any serious consideration of the suffering of marginalized and dominated people—then and now. In some ways what Taylor does in her sermon repeats what Brueggemann models in *Cadences of Home*. As discussed in the previous chapter, Brueggemann presents exile as a psychological and spiritual trial. Perhaps following Brueggemann’s hermeneutic, then, Taylor focuses on the emotional aspects of Isaiah 49:1-6 and proposes a missional call to the congregation that is primarily psycho-spiritual: don’t just do your duty; shine! Had Taylor read Isaiah 49 with an eye for marginalization, she might have said to modern Christians: don’t just go through the motions, God invites even us to shine by “bringing back” those who have been displaced, “gathering in” allies for the work, “raising up” those who have been beaten down, and “restoring” a just and free world. Not only is this call more specific in its call to mission, it is more connected to Isaiah’s calling and interest.

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204 Taylor 178.
205 Such a message is modeled in the writing of Makhosazana K. Nzimande, who interprets Isaiah in light of black, South African experience: “Evidently, Europe and America have emerged as the ‘Babylonian empire’ of our time. Within this economically suicidal postapartheid context, the prophet’s anti-Babylonian political stance in Isaiah is deeply needed in leveling a sharp theological critique against capitalist exploitation of globalization and the subsequent suffering it inflicts on South African blacks. Global ‘exilic voices’ within South Africa and in related postcolonial contexts anticipate the humiliation of arrogant Babylon and the socioeconomic restoration of contemporary postcolonial Judean contexts. Those dispossessed of their wealth by Western greed—for example, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—and those who have suffered tremendous loss of life due to Euro-American military aggression and arrogance cry out for the fall of Babylon (Isaiah 47). Likewise, in rejecting a capitalist ordered society that enriches a few while dehumanizing others, black South Africans envisage an era analogous to the prophet’s prediction, with no more oppressors and land destruction (Isa 16:4)” (Makhosazana K. Nzimande, “Isaiah” 136—146 in The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 142.)
Psychological and spiritual readings of Old Testament texts best serve those who are satisfied with the economic status quo. Such readings do not serve the text nor serve the exploited and marginalized people in whom the author of the text is interested. Psycho-spiritual readings present no call for real change. They do not empower restorative efforts. They do not provide any impetus to change the systems and policies that perpetuate marginalization. They keep sheathed the mouth like a sharp sword. By contrast, Second Isaiah’s preaching in chapter 49 invites us into conversation with texts of old and about the ways in which our congregation’s situation is alike and dissimilar to that of exilic Israel. Perhaps Second Isaiah would preach to Taylor’s congregation today: “O Babylonians in a far off nation, consider the marginalized, the exile, the impoverished and join with Israel in the work of God’s liberation.”

3.4. Resisting and Lamenting like a Holy Fool—Isaiah 50:4-9

In the brief interlude between Servant Songs, Second Isaiah includes reference to Zion. Some scholars see this shift to Zion, which occurs both before and after 50:4-9 as evidence that the passage is disconnected from the larger context. This assessment was one of the reasons Duhm concluded that 50:4-9 was inserted by another source. More recently, however, scholars are finding inter-textual connections missed by Duhm and earlier interpreters. For instance, Blenkinsopp finds thematic connections between 50:4-9 and 51:1-8, which “address people who still maintain belief in redemption in the face of opposition and contempt.” Tull notes that in several ways Isa 50:4-11 engages and


207 Blenkinsopp 319. Drawing on these connections, he argues that “there is good reason to identify the voice heard in 49:1-6 and 50:1-9 with the voice of the author, or at least the principal author, of section 40—55” (320).
seeks to reframe many portions of Second Isaiah's rhetoric. Ulrich Berges also observes an alternating pattern in Isa 49–54 of “passages dealing with the servant on the one hand (49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13—53:12) and Zion/Jerusalem on the other hand (49:14—50:3; 51:1—52:12; 54:1-17a).” This alternating of voice and perspective presents a dialogue that responds to the challenges of exile. Loosely framed, the Servant-voice encourages the audience to join in the justice/liberation cause, becoming YHWH’s servants. The Zion-voice presents the city as a mother (who would be) comforted by her children’s return.

As Tull makes clear, this alternation between Zion and a servant figure is not coincidental. Rather, in these chapters Second Isaiah seems to be reflecting upon and proclaiming a message based on Lamentations, which features its own dually voiced

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208 Patricia Tull Willey, *Remember the Former Things: The Recollection of Previous Texts in Second Isaiah*. SBL Dissertation Series, No 161 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997) 214. Specific connections noted by Tull include “Opened my ear” (50:5–42:20; 48:8), “insults, disgrace, ashamed” (50:6-7–45:16-17), “help” (50:7, 9–41:10-14), “justice/right” (50:8–40:27; 42:1-4; 49:4), words for judicial conflict (50:8–41:1, 21-22), “Who will listen” (50:10–42:23), and “(walking in) darkness” (50:10–42:16) (214). Shalom Paul also notes several linguistic connections with the previous chapter, most notably, the two chapters use the same words for “strength” (49:4; 50:2); “hid” (49:2; 50:6); and a form of mishpat (49:4; 50:8) (Paul 345). Also, it should be noted here that Paul proposes reading the word “strength” in 49:5 as “help,” following a textual variant in 1Qlsa (326). If Paul is correct, this would create another linguistic parallel with 50:7


210 Tull Willey 227-8. Paul also sees a similar move (345).

211 This is not to say that the author does not engage other canonical texts. For instance Blenkinsopp, following Begrich and Westermann, sees connections with a “psalm of individual lament” (320). He also finds Isaiah presenting a nuanced use of Jeremiah. He observes of 50:4-11 that, “unlike the Isaian prophet, Jeremiah complains directly to God, and the strong call for vengeance in Jeremiah is absent from our passage. What we detect in both, however, is the emergence of a unique type of religious literature, the prophetic biography” (320). Baltzer also finds several connections in Isa 54:4-11 with Jeremiah: “personal vilification and threats” (5-6)—Jer 11:19; 15:10; 17:15; 18:18; 20:10; “the
exchange of a lone figure (male–geber) embedded in a literary context focusing on (female–daughter) Zion. Isaiah’s connection with Lamentations is especially clear in chapter 50, where the Servant Song reflects on the speech of the geber in Lam 3:25-30. In fact, Tull argues that “allusions to Lamentations occur more densely in Isaiah 50 than anywhere else.” For instance, the phrase, “gave to attackers my cheek” (Lam 3:30) occurs “no where else in the Hebrew Bible” except in Isa 50:6. So too, “The first person form of [to rebel] is not found anywhere else in the Bible than in these two passages [ Isa 50:5 and Lam 3] and in Lam 1:18 and 20.” Additionally, Tull finds that both Isaiah 50 and Lamentations 3 show several “linguistic parallels” with regard to “concerns with ears and hearing, rebellion, renewal in the morning, YHWH’s role as invocation of Yahweh and expressions of trust” (7-8)—Jer 11:20; 17:14; 20:11,13; “the judicial clarification of the accusations” (8-9)—Jer 11:19; 15:10-11; 17:15-16; 18:18-20; 20:10; “the deflecting of the threatened fate on to the enemy” (9)—Jer 11:21-23; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21-23; 20:12. Of these connections, Baltzer observes, “In the post exilic period the picture of ‘the suffering prophet’ was clearly modeled by the biography of Jeremiah” (340). He sees, further, a possible connection with Deuteronomy: “Isa 50:4 might be called a good summing up of this beginning of Deuteronomy, and in that book the key word [lmd] is used in various forms with striking frequency” (340).

212 As Tull notes further, neither Isa 50 nor Lam 3 discuss Jerusalem/Zion even though “the city surrounds both texts” (Tull Willey 218).

213 Compare Lam 3:25-30: “The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, to put one’s mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), to give one’s cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults.”

214 Tull Willey 219.

215 Tull argues that Lam 3:30 has been “adapted and expanded” in Isa 50:5 (Tull Willey 216).

216 Ibid. 217.
defending attorney and judge, and the figure’s trust while walking in darkness without light.”

Still, the connection between Isaiah 50 and the book of Lamentations is not one of mere citation nor straightforward exegesis of an older text. Rather, as Tull asserts, the poet in Isaiah presents an “evocation of words and images” drawn from Lamentations 3. Here again Second Isaiah preaches. The text of Isaiah 50 reflects homiletically on this older testament as a source of proclamation to a contemporary situation. The author reshapes Lamentations 3 for their contemporary audience. Whereas, in the face of suffering, Lamentations 3 records both complaint and hope, Second Isaiah’s proclamation emphasizes only hope:

“The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word” (50:4a)
“The Lord GOD helps me” (50:7a)
“he who vindicates me is near” (50:8a)
“It is the Lord GOD who helps me” (50:9a)

In fact, there is not any complaint from the servant-preacher (though in Isa 50:10-11 a disciple seems to complain about the preacher’s reception). Furthermore, while Lamentations indicates that God is an afflicter and cause of suffering, the preacher in

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217 Tull Willey 227. For a more detailed account of these connections, see Tull Willey 217-8.
218 Ibid. 216-7.
219 As Tull analyzes Isa 50’s message, the “subtle shifts in Second Isaiah transform the discussion into a meditation on human faithfulness [as opposed to Lam 3’s exploration of YHWH’s faithfulness]” (Tull Willey 227).
220 “Isaiah places more emphasis on the speaker’s hopeful words than on his laments and complaints, which were originally far more numerous” (Tull Willey 219).
221 No complaint from sufferer: “all complaint language is removed from the sufferer's mouth and attributed to another speaker, who in verse 10 emphasizes the darkness in which the speaker has had to walk” (Tull Willey 219).
Second Isaiah “does not discuss this problem.”\(^{222}\) It is not that Second Isaiah is preaching against the text of Lamentations 3. Rather, the preacher emphasizes here key aspects within this older text to address the present needs of the congregation. Suffering is a real presence in both texts because it is the experience of both audiences in related but different forms. In fact, because of these differences, Second Isaiah eschews complaint and counsels hope, encouraging return from exile. The preacher then takes the message a step further. Here the preacher of Isaiah 50 embodies—and invites the congregation to embody—the characteristics that the *geber* of Lamentations can only advise and envision.\(^{223}\) For instance, where the *geber* says,

> “The LORD is good to those who wait for him…It is good that one should wait quietly” (Lam 3:25-26),

the preacher proclaims,

> “Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious” (Isa 50:4-5).

While the *geber* prescribes,

> “It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth…to give one’s cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults” (3:27, 30),

the preacher testifies,

> “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting” (50:6).

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\(^{222}\) “God’s role as afflicter enters in only in relation to those addressed in verse 11” (Tull Willey 219).

\(^{223}\) “The speaker in Second Isaiah describes himself as displaying the qualities that the Lamentations figure does not claim, but merely envisions and prescribes” (Tull Willey 219).
Thus, in the face of suffering the preacher in Second Isaiah draws on Lamentations 3 to call the congregation to hope and to live into an embodied way of resistance to domination.\textsuperscript{224}

This is a powerful and risky word within the preacher’s context. While some commentators argue that the servant becomes here an ideal prophet-figure,\textsuperscript{225} it should be noted that Isaiah 50:4-11 indicates that the preacher’s approach to domination is strange to the congregation and, therefore, subject to rejection, mockery, and perhaps even legal proceedings.

The preacher remarks upon resistance in several places. Further, a later voice—that might be a disciple’s voice—challenges the congregation about their obedience to the servant’s message.\textsuperscript{226} Within the body of the message, the preacher remarks upon their own experience of abuse—hitting, beard-pulling, and spitting. (See 50:6 above). It is not immediately clear who perpetuates this abuse. Shalom Paul observes, “the first two items on this list of travails—flogging and tearing of the hair—appear in the same order in the

\textsuperscript{224} Or, as Tull states, “The peaceful submission to abuse that was prescribed by the geber has thus been carried out, and carried further, by the first-person figure in Isaiah 50, who is identified in verse 10 as YHWH’s servant” (Tull Willey 216).


\textsuperscript{226} Isa 50:10-11: “Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the LORD and relies upon his God? But all of you are kindlers of fire, lighters of firebrands. Walk in the flame of your fire, and among the brands that you have kindled! This is what you shall have from my hand: you shall lie down in torment.”
Assyrian law Code (MAL A.44, 59) as punishments of debasement.”

Perhaps, then, this is the punitive response from a repressive regime to the servant’s earlier messages of resistance and liberating justice. As Brueggemann notes: “It is possible that the abuse comes from Babylonian authorities who seek to intimidate and silence such subversive teaching.” Such a response might explain the numerous expressions from the sphere of law in Isa 50:8-9. While these expressions do not definitively indicate government proceedings against a prophetic figure for sedition, Blenkinsopp is surely right when he observes: “The fate of other prophetic or messianic figures at the hands of the Babylonians, as reported by Jeremiah (Jer 29:21-23), shows that such an outcome was by no means unlikely and may in fact have come about subsequently.”

At the same time, a case can be made that the prophet faced significant resistance from within his own community. In some ways, Isa 49:4-9 foreshadowed this possibility with preaching that asked the congregation, Israel, to be about a different way of being Israel in response to their exilic circumstances. Shalom Paul notes that the abuse received by the speaker in Isaiah 50 is similar to Ezra’s actions over the perceived sins of the

[227] Paul 351.
[228] Brueggemann, Isaiah 40—66 122. Brueggemann sees another possible reference to Babylonian abuse. In 50:10, the servant is said to walk in darkness. Brueggemann notes that the theme of darkness was also connected to Assyrian oppression in Isa 9:2. “Here, in a later context, the ‘darkness’ may be the Babylonian exile” (124).

[229] Here Blenkinsopp identifies:
50:8 “hitsḏiq”—“to prove the accused innocent” (43:9, 26; 53:11)
50:9 “hirša”—“to prove the accused guilty” (54:17)
50:8 “rib”—“legal proceedings brought against another party” (41:11, 21; 49:25)
50:8 “ba’al mišpāt”—“the one who hands down the verdict” (41:1; 53:8)
50:8 “āmād”—“to take part in legal proceedings” (44:11; 47:13)
50:8 “nāgaš”—“initiate legal proceedings” (41:1, 21-22; 45:20-21) (Blenkinsopp 322).

[230] Blenkinsopp 322.
priests and Levites (Ezra 9:3) and to the punishment doled out in Nehemiah 13:25 for Jews who married foreign women (cursed—beaten—pulled hair). Further, while the text includes legal language, this rhetoric is also frequently used as a prophetic trope for speaking about Israel’s sin and suffering. These references do not necessarily indicate the presence of an actual trial. Nor is there clear indication here that "the speaker has been imprisoned by the Babylonian authorities and is awaiting trial."

The witness/disciple in Isa 50:10-11 also seems to refer to opponents of the servant from within Israel: “Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant…But all of you are kindlers of fire, lighters of firebrands…This is what you shall have from my hand: you shall lie down in torment.” Brueggemann observes that 50:10 “is actually dominated by positive verbs: ‘fear, obey (listen), walk, trust, rely upon; of these verbs he asserts, “Such faith is possible, but it is not evident in the community of exiles, who do not trust Yahweh enough to risk the summons and leadership of the servant.” Blenkinsopp interprets the entire passage (50:4-11) as indication that the servant’s mission is to all Israel, that the speaker recognizes a bi-furcated response within Israel, and judges (perhaps via a disciple) those who reject the servant’s

231 He also adds that spitting is obviously a further form of debasement (Shalom Paul 352). See also 2 Sam 10:4 for taking hair as punishment.
232 For instance, within Isaiah the *rib* is most frequently used as a prophetic trope: 3:13; 19:20; 27:8; 34:8; 41:21; 45:9; 49:25; 51:22; 57:16. Note, however, other references in Isaiah may refer to actual legal cases: 1:17; 1:23; 41:11; 58:4.
233 Blenkinsopp 319.
235 “That the mission is to his fellow-Judeans is evident from the wording: “sustaining the dispirited” (Blenkinsopp 319).
236 “The speaker therefore is distinguishing between those who revere Yahweh and heed the prophet’s message, even though bewildered and confused” (Blenkinsopp 322).
Precisely because of this bi-furcated response to the prophetic message, Brueggemann finds it most likely that the “abuse comes from other members of the exilic community who have worked out a sustainable compromise between Yahweh and the empire, who do not want to have the compromise exposed or questioned, and who do not want to be pressed to decide for Yahweh and for the disruptive venture of homecoming in a distinctive identity.” While this may be the correct reading of the situation in Isaiah 50, it also sounds suspiciously like an assessment of the contemporary, white, middle-class, American congregations that Brueggemann rightly wants to challenge in his own writing and preaching.

At any rate, it seems wise to hold open the references to abuse so that they include multiple possible referents. Indeed, reading this Song homiletically invites such an approach. Given what the Servant Song’s have preached thus far about resistance, liberation, and justice, it is not difficult to see why Babylonian authorities might seek to arrest and suppress the servant. Given the message for Israel to be a particular kind of people in mission to (differently believing) Israel and to the nations, it is reasonable to expect intramural resistance and even censure that includes cursing, hitting, hair-pulling, and spitting. Perhaps there are also other factions who resist the servant’s preaching. To this end, note that in Romans 8 Paul interprets Isa 50:8-9 in a way that includes numerous types of persecution from spiritual forces, intramural opponents, and empire. In both

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237 Blenkinsopp reads vv 10-11 as “a comment on the servant’s statement by one who is qualified not only to speak for him but to pronounce a judgment on those who oppose him. This betokens commentary by a disciple” (Blenkinsopp 323).
239 Rom. 8:31-39: “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he
passages the homiletic move seems to be less about identifying a particular opponent and more about highlighting God’s sustaining presence in the midst of abuse and oppression. This is the way Pauli Murray reads Isaiah 50 in her sermon, “The Dilemma of the Minority Christian.” Murray understood herself as someone with a “pixie-prophetic (poetic) background” that put her in the company of “those scrappy 8th century B.C. prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah and with Paul, the Apostle, whose name I bear.” In her life she faced significant resistance, especially from racist, sexist, and homophobic opponents beyond and in the Church. With Isaiah 50, Murray seeks to highlight the “promise” of the prophet’s words. Noting that the preacher in Isaiah 50:7 says that YHWH will help the servant and not allow the servant to be put to shame, Murray proclaims that Isaiah calls us to a radical reliance on God’s presence and power in the midst of oppression. She preaches about the God who controls the universe, “moves in history,” “is continually working to reconcile humankind to himself and his

not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”


love,” and who invites us to join with this work by becoming “God’s suffering servants in the salvation history of the world.”

At the same time, Murray wrestles with the challenge of suffering. She notes her discomfort with the prophet’s words when he preaches: “I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward” (Isa 50:5). Murray responds, “But I am rebellious; I am impatient. I do not want to suffer for others; I do not want to suffer silently. When someone is unjust to me, I want to scream and yell and tell them off.” Apparently this is exactly what happened in the months before this sermon as Murray fought the systems in her seminary that supported white, male privilege. In a letter to a particularly vexing student, Murray wrote, “we are called upon to be suffering servants, but nobody said a suffering servant couldn’t scream when it hurts. And, brother, it hurts!” Here Murray subverts a traditional Christian reading of the words suffering and servant, which have been used for centuries to marginalize and silence especially black, non-binary, people. In her sermon on the Servant, Murray notes this challenge. She preaches, “For those of us who have been born into a group that has been the object of contempt, injustice, and oppression, the figure of the Suffering Servant, the example of Jesus Christ, presents us with a most

\[\text{242} \text{ Murray, “The Dilemma of the Minority Christian,” 9-10.}\\ \text{243} \text{ Ibid. 8.}\\ \text{244} \text{ In correspondence with a classmate who was opposing her, Murray wrote, “If I can’t take your judgmental statements and your anger, I am in the wrong place. If you cannot take my methods of fighting for survival, then you have chosen the wrong vocation. In both instances, we are called upon to be suffering servants, but nobody said a suffering servant couldn’t scream when it hurts. And, brother, it hurts!” (Pauli Murray, “Introduction,” in Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings, ed. Anthony Pinn, xxxi, citing Pauli Murray, Letter to Ernest Pollack, March 21, 1974, Pauli Murray Papers, box 23, folder 466).}\]
difficult dilemma.” She adds in a later sermon: “consider the impact of traditional
Christian doctrines that stress obedience, meekness, humility, and suffering servanthood.
Many oppressed people are turned off by these doctrines, seen to be expressions of their
own powerlessness and used to invoke divine approval for patterns of dominance and
submission in human relationships, as in the experience of blacks during slavery.”

Murray’s solution to this dilemma is to reject powerlessness and submission to
domination. So, Murray screams. She cries out. She instigates for justice, and she
interprets this work as a faithful response to the Servant’s preaching in Isaiah and to
Jesus’ appropriation of Suffering Servanthood in the gospels. Ultimately, Murray
embraces both suffering and servanthood in her sermon on the Suffering Servant, though
not in the traditional, passive sense. Rather, she understands the preacher here to be
calling for non-violent resistance to oppression. Murray points to the life and witness
of Martin Luther King, Jr. as the Suffering Servant example to follow. She also
highlights the work on systemic evil in America by fellow Episcopalian, William
Stringfellow, and calls us to say “no” to the “conglomeration of principalities and powers


\[246\] Murray, “Salvation and Liberation,” preached April 1, 1979, Pauli Murray: Selected
Sermons and Writings 132.

\[247\] “It is difficult to be gentle with those who are unkind, who say and do harmful things
about us and to us. Yet the hard truth is that this is the only way” (Murray, “The Dilemma
of the Minority Christian,” Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings 9). She later
adds, “Somehow, I feel that we have a destiny that is beyond our struggle for civil rights
and human rights, or social justice, and that our consciousness of this destiny must
permeate all that we do here and now, in this time and place, and in this country” (10).

in which death furnishes the meaning.” Murray preaches in a way that seeks to break down the borders of othering that she has experienced. Instead, she calls every Christian to embrace their otherness in the world: “we are all aliens as Christians in a profound sense that transcends our racial or social status.”

As Murray’s preaching highlights, the Third Servant Song is a powerful and risky word. The preacher here does not fit into traditional or ideal standards for “prophet.” He/she is rejected and marginalized. This abuse comes about, in part, because the preacher’s approach to domination is strange. It encourages a non-traditional, non-violent way of resisting oppression and violence.

In many ways, the portrayal of the Servant’s preaching participates in aspects of the preaching fool tradition described by Johan Cilliers and Charles Campbell. I do not claim the Servant is a fool in the fullest sense that Cilliers and Campbell describe, but the figure in Isa 50 does participate in key aspects of the Holy Fool tradition in at least five distinct ways:

First, the use of the Servant’s sermon breaks down traditional barriers between the preacher and congregation. Here the Servant points to their role as teacher and disciple.

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251 As Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers note, where traditional approaches and “iron theologies” claim “certain bodies are not permitted to preach because they are the wrong shape or gender or color or sexual orientation. Preaching fools will challenge these taboos and transgress these boundaries” (Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor, 2012), 156).

252 As Campbell and Cilliers note, “the prophets sometimes did in fact function as fools or jesters in the sense we are discussing” (29, f.n. 42).
The Hebrew word is the same. As the preacher testifies: “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher (lîmmûdim),” so also the preacher in Isa 50:4 claims to listen “as those who are taught (lîmmûdim).” This rare use of the word, lîmmûdim,\textsuperscript{253} interrupts expectations, possibly connects the present to the past sealed testimony of Isaiah of Jerusalem,\textsuperscript{254} and leads the congregation to navigate their own position in relation to the preacher. Claiming that the preacher is teacher and disciple implies that the congregation may be more than listeners. In these ways, the Servant’s sermon, like foolish preaching, “interrupts…creates an unsettled, liminal space in which people may move…is concerned with perception and discernment…does not take itself too seriously.”\textsuperscript{255}

Second, the preacher relies only on the spoken word, or as Shalom Paul observes, “The servant’s strength lies in his tongue.”\textsuperscript{256} Here the preacher remarks that YHWH’s instruction is about “how to sustain the weary with a word” (50:4). The preacher is focused on the weary—those run down and run out by Babylonian domination.\textsuperscript{257} Campbell and Cilliers argue, “Preaching fools are fond of the old age’s fringes.”\textsuperscript{258} Thus, the Servant offers to the weary a sustaining or timely word.\textsuperscript{259} In the face of domination,

\textsuperscript{253} Baltzer 339. Compare 54:13; 8:16.
\textsuperscript{254} Paul sees a connection here to the sealed instruction in Isa 8:16-18 (Paul 350).
\textsuperscript{255} Campbell and Cilliers 37-8.
\textsuperscript{256} Paul 350.
\textsuperscript{257} As Brueggemann argues, “The ‘weary’ are those who are exhausted by the demands and anxieties of Babylonian requirements. Presumably, the sustaining word of the servant is a word about Yahweh, and insistence that the truth of Yahweh contradicts and denies the power and erodes the authority of Babylon. Thus the sustaining word to the weary is not just any pastoral word; it is a word energizing the exiles to their own distinctive identity in a context where that identity is at risk” (Brueggemann, Isaiah 40–66 122).
\textsuperscript{258} Campbell and Cilliers 178.
\textsuperscript{259} Paul notes a range of possible meanings for the word translated “timely.” Some emend it to read “to answer;” others connect the word with an Arabic root meaning “to aid, sustain,” which also has a parallel with literature from Qumran (1QH\textsuperscript{a} 16:37); still others
the Servant as a holy fool stakes their life and the life of their congregation on only the
preached word.²⁶⁰

Third, the use of the Servant’s preaching leads the congregation to take note of
the word of God arriving “morning by morning” (50:4). While this reference points to the
regularity of God’s revelation,²⁶¹ it also invites listeners into a liminal space. The time
described here lies between night and day.²⁶² At this in-between time, the Servant reflects
on Lamentations as lament and hope. As Campbell and Cilliers observe, lament and hope
are also liminal tools of the holy fool:

Lament may be seen by some as dangerous and disruptive because it challenges
the status quo. Lament in this sense is revolutionary and radical...It yearns for
true and deep transformation, and can be celebratory in its vision of the perceived
transformation. Lament represents alternatives...Ultimately lament invokes God
to step in...²⁶³

So then, morning by morning, lament and hope—like “holy anger”—rings out against
“the powers that threaten life.”²⁶⁴ Morning by morning, the Servant enters a “liminal

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²⁶⁰ “At the deepest level, we play the fool through the very act of preaching itself. The
practice of preaching represents a fundamental ethical option in our world. For preaching
represents an ethical decision to bet our lives on the word, rather than on the stone or the
gun or the bomb. And in the face of the powers that be, that seems at times like absolute
folly” (Campbell and Cilliers 124).
²⁶¹ Shalom Paul: “the doubling of the substantive denotes constancy” (351).
²⁶² As John Goldingay and David Payne note, “the beginning of the day...is the time to
seek a word from Yhwh (e.g. Ps 5.4 [3])—or the time for Yhwh to take an initiative in
giving one” (Goldingay 209).
²⁶³ 145.
²⁶⁴ Campbell and Cilliers 145.
space where new perception becomes possible.”

And, morning by morning the Servant proclaims a word intended to instigate and sustain hearers’ own entry into liminal places that might change their perspectives and lead them into greater discernment.

Fourth, the Servant suffers but does not seek to escape it, gain recompense for it, nor glorify the experience of suffering. “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting” (Isa 50:6). Of this line Blenkinsopp observes, “A remarkable feature of the self-presentation of the speaker at this point is that the abuse is so simply stated; there is no protestation of innocence, no calling down vengeance on the perpetrators and, unlike the psalms of individual lament, no plea for vindication.”

The Servant suffers—and is willing to suffer—for the sake of the mission. Here, Campbell and Cilliers note that preaching fools are known to engage in “bizarre, even insane, activities, appearing to be lunatics, idiots, or buffoons.” This is not “a passive glorification of suffering,” but “the way of resistance and interruption, which creates the space for new perception and further resistance.”

Finally, the Servant engages in this resistance action by trusting in God’s deliverance as expressed through a reorienting courtroom metaphor. “[God] who

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265 Campbell and Cilliers: “fools create a liminal space where new perception becomes possible, but where discernment is both invited and required” (87).
266 Campbell and Cilliers: “three of the most fundamental aspects of the fool’s activity” (1) the fool’s role in instigating and sustaining liminality, (2) the fool’s goal of changing perspective, and (3) the fool’s call for discernment” (70).
267 Blenkinsopp 321. He also adds, “the speaker offers himself as a victim of abuse and does so as the price to be paid for fulfilling his mission” (321).
268 Campbell and Cilliers 94.
269 Ibid. 27.
vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?” (50:8-9). Here the rhetoric put on the lips of the Servant seeks to melt “the solidities of the world.” As Brueggemann observes, “The speaker is completely confident that Yahweh presides over the court and will acquit, and therefore the opponents have no power to indict, condemn, or punish.” In this moment of preaching foolishness, the preacher uses metaphor to “engender imagination” around uses of legal proceedings; the preacher employs irony to speak of “two realities at once” — YHWH the judge of the judge; and the preacher engages in a bit of parody that “debunks and unmasks” Babylonian authority. As Campbell and Cilliers assert, “the rhetoric of folly is paradoxical, metaphorical, ironic, and parabolic, requiring discernment from those who hear. Such rhetoric is likewise open to dialogue, to the contributions and corrections of others who stand with the preacher on the threshold of the ages and similarly seek to discern the new creation in the midst of the old.” Thus, perhaps it is not surprising that a potential disciple of the Servant speaks after the Servant and calls the congregation to discern and respond to the preached word (50:10-11).

In his sermon on Isaiah 50:4-9, Charles Campbell continues this discerning dialogue. His preaching highlights the way the Servant can function as a fool who

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270 Ibid. 183.
271 Brueggemann, Isaiah 40—66, 123.
272 Campbell and Cilliers 188.
273 Ibid. 195.
274 Ibid. 197.
275 Ibid. 183.
276 Charles Campbell, “Isaiah 50:4-9a” in Preaching Promise Within the Paradoxes of Life, eds. Johann Cilliers and Len Hansen, Studia Homiletica 11 (Stellenbosch:
preaches to preachers today. Campbell begins by reflecting on the verse: “Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.”²⁷⁷ Then

Campbell describes Isaiah’s experience and compares it (like Pauli Murray) with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s experience. Campbell further connects the Servant and Martin Luther King, Jr. with the prophetic weariness shared by others during the Societas Homiletica meeting as they wrestled with immigration, climate change, and the injustices of global economic systems. Then, as now, “God calls: ‘Wake up! Wake up! I have a word for you today.’ And some days it’s affirmation, and some days it’s provocation, some days its migration, and other days it’s anticipation. Always a specific word for a specific time and a specific place—this day.”²⁷⁸ However, Campbell acknowledges that this word is rarely accepted easily. Even the good news of “Second Isaiah”²⁷⁹ and of Jesus is rejected as unsettling.

At this point, Campbell turns to reflect on Christ as Suffering Servant. One might expect Campbell to lean-in to this turn given his earlier work in Preaching Jesus.²⁸⁰ However, he does not linger long with the way Christ interprets Isaiah 50. Instead,

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²⁷⁷ Isaiah 50:4b.
²⁷⁸ Campbell, “Isaiah 50:4-9a” 332.
²⁷⁹ Note Campbell’s use of source and redaction criticism here (Campbell, “Isaiah 50:4-9a” 332).
²⁸⁰ For instance, in Preaching Jesus Campbell argues that the cultural-linguistic world of the Old Testament is connected to the Church through the story of Jesus (Campbell, Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 254-5). Furthermore, Campbell appears to envision this connection as uni-directional: “[I]n typological preaching the move is from the story of Israel through Jesus Christ to the Church” (Campbell, Preaching Jesus 254).
Campbell concludes his sermon by inverting a traditional typological connection.\textsuperscript{281} And, this move that “changes our perceptions” and rearranges the world\textsuperscript{282} is designed to empower his congregation to continue their work against the Powers.\textsuperscript{283} Thus, while Jesus is one of several justifications for the weary prophet type in Campbell’s sermon, Isaiah becomes the fulfillment of the type.

Campbell’s inverted typology recognizes, first, that an obsessive christo-telic focus can miss—or at least minimize—the most natural connection that a congregation might have with scripture. In this case it is the Servant, Campbell proclaims, who is the model for “all of us who take up the preaching office.”\textsuperscript{284} The Servant, when faced with the challenges of prophetic ministry, does not give into our temptations to either “roll over and go back to sleep” or trudge forward “for another dreary day of preaching.” Nor does the Servant take on the mantle of the suffering savior. Instead, he “meditates. He prays”:

\begin{quote}
The Lord helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced; The Lord helps me, therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know I shall not be put to shame; the one who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord who helps me; Who will declare me guilty? Amen.\textsuperscript{285}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{281} A traditional typology would function linearly, moving from an Old Testament antitype to a (usually New Testament) type. For instance, Moses is an antitype for Christ (who is a fuller type of Moses). However, Campbell inverts the direction of the typology in this sermon: Jesus functions as an antitype to Isaiah’s fuller embodiment of prophetic work and suffering.
\textsuperscript{282} Campbell and Cilliers 81.
\textsuperscript{283} Campbell preaches: “Our persistent and unmanageable God keeps on interrupting, keeps on unsettling, keeps on waking us up to preach another day” (“Isaiah 50:4-9a” 333, emphasis added). Compare these highlighted verbs with Campbell’s counsel for confronting the Powers in \textit{The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).
\textsuperscript{284} Campbell, “Isaiah 50:4-9a” 334.
\textsuperscript{285} This is Campbell’s rephrasing of Isa 50:7-9a (\textit{“Isaiah 50:4-9a”} 334).
Campbell’s use of the Servant’s prayer points to a second function of inverted typology. It demonstrates to the congregation that the Old Testament is, in itself, a significant part of the Christian cultural-linguistic world. In *Preaching Fools*, Campbell and Johan Cilliers assert, “Whenever we are tempted to settle down into secure, rigid identities, the preaching fool holds up the murky, fragmented mirror before our eyes to remind us that we are always on the way.”\(^\text{286}\) In his 2016 sermon, Campbell lifts up the Servant as a holy fool, praying while on the way. Without rejecting Israel, requiring Christ, resorting to individualistic pietism, or otherwise rigidly securing the text, Campbell shows that the Servant’s words are worth emulating. And, by twice enacting the Servant’s rhetoric near the end of his sermon, Campbell seeks to form his hearers in this culture and language of prayer so that today’s prophetic preaching fools may be empowered like the Servant who “gets out of bed…takes a deep breath…tends the wounds…and goes out to preach another day.”\(^\text{287}\)

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Reading the third Servant Song as resistance preaching from a holy fool offers us three main insights. First, it speaks into an exegetical challenge related to interpreting Isaiah 49-55. Namely, a homiletical reading of these chapters shows how the Servant Songs might hold together with their context as extended imaginative reinterpretations of the book of Lamentations. These homilies are not necessarily word-for-word or chapter-for-chapter expositions of Lamentations. They do not refer to the Servant as *geber*, and

\(^\text{286}\) Campbell and Cilliers, *Preaching Fools* 169.
\(^\text{287}\) Campbell, “Isaiah 50:4-9a” 334.
they speak of Zion as mother more than daughter—thus explaining Duhm’s interpretation. Nevertheless, Isaiah’s Servant passages and Isaiah’s Zion passages can be understood to preach together to unsettle, reframe, and reimagine the words and images of Lamentations about the experience of exile decades after they were first written.

Second and related to the first point, interpreting the third Servant Song as resistance preaching from a holy fool models for us a way of preaching the older testament. Here Isaiah 50:4-9 opens up the congregation’s imagination to what the Servant perceives to be the most helpful word from Lamentations for the congregation in the moment. The Servant allows other lines from Lamentations to lay dormant. Whether the Servant sees these lines as helpful, inconsequential, or problematic does not matter here. What the preacher cites is meant to lead hearers into a liminal space where a new world is possible. So, where Lamentations speaks of giving the cheek to attackers as a lamentable situation (or a call to embrace a time of suffering as punishment), the Servant asks the congregation to imagine giving one’s cheek to attackers as part of God’s daily missional work of foolish resistance to domination. Where Lamentations complains and hopes, the Servant emphasizes hope for vindication. Where Lamentations names silence and quiet waiting as signs of God’s abandonment, the Servant invites the congregation to listen every morning for God waking the prophetic ear. Where Lamentations names “we have transgressed and rebelled” (3:42), the Servant playfully notes that he has not rebelled against God’s word of rebellion against Babylonian authority. Where Lamentations names suffering as God’s judgment, the Servant imagines YHWH siding

288 *Except for Isa 52:2.
with suffering Israel and judging the human plaintiff and judge. In all these ways, the Servant’s preaching does not simply repeat the older text. Neither does it undo or argue against the text. Rather, the Servant’s preaching read the older biblical text through the lens of contemporary marginality and suffering. Thus, in this sermon the Servant imaginatively embodies the words of Lamentations and calls the congregation to do the same—no longer as acts of lament, perhaps, but certainly as modes of resistance to domination.

Finally, interpreting this Servant Song as resistance preaching from a holy fool helps uncover the challenge that traditional cultural assumptions present for preaching the Old Testament. In Isaiah 50:4-9, the Servant must navigate the cultural assumptions linked to suffering brought about by Babylonian culture and interpreted within a Jewish sub-culture that had accommodated itself to life in Babylonian culture. This led the preacher to a radical reimagining of Lamentations as a source for identifying God’s presence in suffering and as a guide to resistance. In her preaching on Isa 50, Pauli Murray had to refframe suffering and servanthood because individuals and institutions shaped by white, heteronormative, patriarchy were using traditional readings of suffering servanthood to marginalize her own voice and witness. Thus Murray lifts up Martin Luther King, Jr. as the example of a suffering servant who non-violently resists in words and embodied suffering. She also invokes William Stringfellow’s critique of America as a call for humans to choose a different way of living, worshipping, and reading scripture. And, through her own scrappy, poetic, prophetic preaching Murray embodies a form of suffering servanthood that directly challenges traditional, Christian cultural assumptions and opens up the possibility of a new world for black, non-binary, femme people and for
the Church as a whole. Finally, Charles Campbell’s sermon on Isa 50 wrestles with the assumptions behind cultural linguistic approaches to preaching the Old Testament. Here he inverts the traditional typology that moves from an older text to a fulfillment in Jesus. In so-doing Campbell calls on his congregation of prophetic witnesses to pray the Servant’s prayer as their own and to recognize that it is not only the words of Jesus that shape Christian consciousness but also—and in this case, especially—the words of an exilic prophet living as a marginalized witness in the midst of empire.

3.5. Dialoging Against Domination—Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Though it is directly referenced only twice in the New Testament, the Fourth Servant Song is one of the most well-known passages in Christian imagination. Since at least the Patristic era, it has become a standard text for reflection on the passion of Jesus. Handel set more of its verses to music than any other biblical book or chapter. Isaiah 52:13—53:12 (hereafter simplified to Isaiah 53) is the subject of a vast amount of

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research from historical, \textsuperscript{292} rhetorical, \textsuperscript{293} theological, \textsuperscript{294} interfaith, \textsuperscript{295} and exegetical perspectives. \textsuperscript{296} It is the subject of conference proceedings, research anthologies, monographs, and dissertations. There is far too much written about this passage to survey here.

At the same time, an attenuated focus on one issue within Isaiah 53 may skew the interpretation of the text. For instance, attempting too narrowly to ferret out the servant’s historical identity or focusing too sharply on theological debates about vicarious suffering that arise from this passage actually detracts from the focus of the Song’s unifying themes and risks subverting the passage’s functions—to the degree that one can parse


On the one hand, contrary to the interest of many historical critics, the servant cannot be concretely identified here. Isa 53 does not provide enough evidence. Rather, the language remains vague and symbolic. And, the context includes references to Israel as the servant and passages that seem to use “servant” as a collective noun. Thus, the interpreter cannot rule out the possibility that Isa 53 could refer to an individual or to a group or groups of people. On the other hand, contrary to the claims of many theologians, this passage does not lay out a clear theology of vicarious suffering. We do not know who the servant is, what fate the servant meets (e.g. persecution, sickness, death), who is responsible for the suffering (e.g. God, authorities, Israel), whether the suffering is meant to be sacrificial or metaphorical, nor even what becomes of the servant afterwards (e.g. healing, resurrection, honor in death). The only thing that Isaiah 53 seems to clearly indicate is that those who thought they were certain about the servant’s theological identity were wrong (Isa 53:1-6).

Of course, Isa 53 does employ the servant trope and a reflection on efficacious suffering. However, when read homiletically it becomes clear that neither of these two rhetorical devices are the point of the sermon. Rather, they are significant pieces of a whole. When read as a sermon, one possible focus for Isa 53 is acknowledging suffering and announcing deliverance for the hearer. A possible function is to offer a word of hope that inspires collaboration and mission. This possible sermonic focus and function is demonstrated when examining how Isa 53 engages older texts and how the preacher uses rhetoric to engage the congregation.

First, Isa 53 engages in reflection on scriptural language in older texts. The preacher declares of the servant, “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearsers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isa 53:7b). On its face, this line appears to be a proclamation that draws on Jeremiah’s pre-exilic testimony.

There Jeremiah says,

But I was like a gentle lamb
led to the slaughter.
And I did not know it was against me
that they devised schemes, saying,
“Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
so that his name will no longer be remembered!” (11:19).

Blenkinsopp observes, “Jeremiah’s complaint…may have influenced the language of Isaiah 53:7.” The hesitation here comes because there are not as many direct references to the MT of Jeremiah as one might assume from the translation. (Though Shalom Paul notes that both of the versions of this text at Qumran—IQIsa\(a\) and IQIsa\(b\)—present Isa 53:7 more similarly to Jeremiah 11:9 than the MT). As it is, the preacher here follows Jeremiah by employing lamb-language to reflect on suffering and persecution. Second Isaiah also reflects on the tree (53:2) that was destroyed and upon being cut off from

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298 Shalom Paul also finds parallels for this text in Ps 44:23 (“It is for your sake that we are slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”) and in Mesopotamian literature (to be slaughtered like sheep). (Paul, Isaiah 40–66 407, citing CAD T:3).

299 Blenkinsopp, "The Sacrificial Life" 7, emphasis added.

300 Paul, Isaiah 40–66 407.

301 JPS translates “tree.” The Hebrew uses a different word here than in Jeremiah. Still tree imagery plays a significant role in Isaiah, and gains new interpretation the latter part of Second Isaiah. The servant here is described as growing “like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground” (53:2). Thus far in Isaiah, “root” has taken on a range of meanings. It has pointed to the Davidic line—the root of Jesse (11:10). In 27:6 “root” represented the theoretical hope of deliverance for a people. In 37:31-32 that hope was
the land of the living (53:8). There may even be an allusion to Jeremiah’s “devised schemes” (hošbû maḥâšābôt) in the references to holding the servant of “no account” (ḥâšabnûhû) in Isa 53:3, 4. The preacher here certainly captures a similar animosity between the servant and others. Indeed, the possible citation of Jeremiah is already “an elaboration of the simile in v. 6.”

The people confess, “we like sheep have gone astray.” With these connections, Isaiah 53:1-11 can be understood as a homiletical elaboration that reflects upon Jeremiah 11:19 and ends with the servant’s undoing of Jeremiah’s lament. Where there once was scheming, destroying, and disremembering, now there will be offspring, prolonged days, light, satisfaction, and righteousness (53:10-11). As Brueggemann preaches this text: “The servant, this nobody with no resources, realized, concretely, in the rescue of survivors (the “root”) from the Assyrian siege. Here, “root” is not applied to a theory or to a people. An individual once again seems to don this role. However, in a move that echoes the great destruction and small seeds of hope from Isa 6:13, this “young plant” suffers greatly and has only a small hope of deliverance. This “root” is “despised,” “rejected,” and held of “no account” (53:3). He comes bearing “infirmities,” and carrying “diseases” (53:4-5). YHWH is said to have laid upon him “the iniquity of us all” (53:6). The servant may even die (53:8-9). As Klaus Baltzer recognizes, the servant “does not possess the beauty and perfection that belong to the picture of a sovereign” (404). This servant represented as “root” is an especially striking contrast to the earlier Davidic connotations of “root.” And yet, suffering is not the entire picture. As the frame of the fourth servant song indicates, God will exalt (yârûm) and lift up (wenîšša’) the servant (52:13). These verbs are often used in descriptions of God (see 6:1, 57:15). Furthermore, the song indicates that the servant shall startle many nations and shut the mouths of kings (52:15). Again, the root “shall see light,” “make many righteous,” and share in a great portion of “the spoil” (53:11-12). These descriptions sound much more fitting for a Davidic king, and such connection may be the aim of Second Isaiah. However, in chapter 55 the Davidic covenant is renewed not with an individual, but with “everyone who thirsts” (55:1-4). The vision of the Holy One of Israel is to glorify the people (55:5). It is a joyful, communal vision that will be celebrated with mountains singing and trees clapping (55:12), for instead of thorns and briers the cypress and myrtle will come as an everlasting sign (55:13).

breaks cycles of death and hurt precisely by a life of vulnerability, goes into the violence, and ends its tyranny.”

However, this sermon-Song may not only reflect upon Jeremiah and the impact of an individual sufferer. The preacher may refer to the sacrificial analogy from Leviticus—even in Isa 53:7. The lamb is frequently the animal mentioned as appropriate for sacrifice. Indeed, as Blenkinsopp observes, “The lamb is explicitly identified with the [ʾāšām] in the Levitical laws about sacrifice, including the complicated proceedings for treating a person with a serious skin disease, which may have been the lot of the Servant.” Note here that the preacher, who calls the servant a lamb led to slaughter, also refers to the servant as an offering for sin/guilt (ʾāšām) in 53:10. The word, ʾāšām

303 Brueggemann, Isaiah 40–66 145.

304 Goldingay and Payne note, “Only here does the Old Testament talk of ‘laying down’ (śîm) a reparation-offering; one normally ‘brings’ it” (Goldingay and Payne, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55 320). Thus, there is also linguistic uncertainty with regard to Isa 53’s use of Levitical language. Fredrik Hägglund also argues that ʾasham in 53:10 “should neither be understood against its priestly background in Lev 5, nor should it be seen as a compensatory payment” but rather as “guilt” (Fredrik Hägglund, Isaiah 53 in the Light of Homecoming after Exile (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 73). Further, Hägglund sees the syntax of the verse and the thrust of the passage to emphasize “on whose behalf the servant intervenes, not to whom this is directed”(81).

305 Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Sacrificial Life and Death of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13–53:12)” Vetus Testamentum 66 (2016):1–14, 7. Blenkinsopp acknowledges, however, that both the word ʾasham and the entire verse of Isa 53:10 are obscure—even for interpreters in antiquity (2). This raises a key question about the preacher’s intent with this Song, especially given the poetic nature of Isa 53. Namely, does the preacher intend here to exposit a Levitical sacrificial system and apply it to the servant. Or, would it be better to conceive of the preacher as engaging Levitical language about guilt-offering as a symbolic/poetic device rich with possibility and open to communal interpretation? This symbolic/poetic read will be explored further below.

306 Brettler asserts, “From a historical perspective, it is likely that the exiles’ excessive guilt is what evoked this theological idea. As with the annual scapegoat ritual in the now-vanished Temple (see Leviticus 16), they could understand their guilt as having been transferred onto another party” (Marc Brettler, How to Read the Jewish Bible (New York: Oxford, 2007) 206).
“connotes guilt resulting from an offense against God by an infraction of the ritual order, or against another person or persons, constituting a violation of the social order.”\textsuperscript{307} This kind of offense requires “a ritual process in which the essential elements were the sacrifice of an animal”—the ‘āšām—which was to be provided by the guilty party.\textsuperscript{308} All of this is spelled out in Leviticus 5:14-19, which calls for an ‘āšām in response to a person’s ‘āšām.\textsuperscript{309} Another interesting sacrificial connection comes in 53:12b, where it is declared of the servant: “he poured out himself (napšò, “his life/soul”) to death.” Blenkinsopp argues that the combination of “life” with “pour out” “obliges us to adopt a translation which associates death with bloodshed and, in this instance, sacrificial bloodshed.”\textsuperscript{310}

Obliges may be too strong here. For instance, Goldingay and Payne note that if “pour out” refers to sacrificial death, then the next line seems anti-climactic: “and was numbered with the transgressors.” They agree with Whybray, who argues similarly to Ibn Ezra that “pour out” is a reference by extension to one’s willingness to be exposed to

\textsuperscript{307} Blenkinsopp, ”The Sacrificial Life” 5.
\textsuperscript{308} Ibid. 5.
\textsuperscript{309} Marked here with italics: ”The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: When any of you commit a trespass and sins unintentionally in any of the holy things of the LORD, you shall bring, as your guilt offering to the LORD, a ram without blemish from the flock, convertible into silver by the sanctuary shekel; it is a guilt offering….If any of you sin without knowing it, doing any of the things that by the LORD’S commandments ought not to be done, you have incurred guilt, and are subject to punishment. You shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish from the flock, or the equivalent, as a guilt offering; and the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for the error that you committed unintentionally, and you shall be forgiven. It is a guilt offering; you have incurred guilt before the LORD (Lev 5:14-19).
\textsuperscript{310} Blenkinsopp, ”The Sacrificial Life” 7. Here Blenkinsopp points to Ps 141:8, wherein one prays for deliverance from enemies by saying, “Do not pour out my life blood.”
death.\textsuperscript{311} So too, Shalom Paul notes that a similar euphemism is used in Akkadian literature simply as a way to talk about death: \textit{napi\d{"u}t tab\d{"u}ku} (lit: “the pouring out of life”).\textsuperscript{312} Thus, it is probably better to say that the preacher in Isa 53 invites reflection on a certain kind of death.

That this death has sacrificial overtones is brought out by the preacher’s language in the rest of the passage. The preacher may refer to a guilt offering, which is “effected by dashing the blood of the slaughtered lamb against the sacrificial altar (Lev 7:1-6). Blood also has an essential part to play in the ritual for the Day of Atonement inclusive of the scapegoat ritual (Leviticus 16). As the sins of the people are carried off into the wilderness, literally, ‘a cut-off land’…so the Servant is ‘cut off from the land of the living.’”\textsuperscript{313} While this Levitical connection is stronger, note again that Jeremiah 11:19 refers to the “land of the living.” Thus, something more than recitation of Jeremiah or Leviticus may be occurring in this sermon.

To this end, Leslie Brisman offers a hybrid interpretation that links the language of sacrificial rites with the exemplary nature of a prophet like Jeremiah. Brisman argues first that the development of the concept of a suffering servant grew out of reflection on animal sacrifice in Leviticus.\textsuperscript{314} Brisman points to Leviticus 16, which describes ritual atonement as that which “involves a literal bearing away of sin, conceived as a burden symbolically placed on the back of a goat.”\textsuperscript{315} Interestingly, the ritual in Lev 16 involves

\textsuperscript{311} Goldingay and Payne, \textit{A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55} 329.
\textsuperscript{312} Paul, \textit{Isaiah 40–66} 413.
\textsuperscript{313} Blenkinsopp, ”The Sacrificial Life” 8.
\textsuperscript{315} Brisman 297.
two goats. One is sacrificed, and the other carries the burden of sin into the wilderness. Brisman reflects here, “perhaps both goats are ‘scapegoats,’ the one sacrificed immediately representing the efficacious substitution and the one ‘escaped’ lingering with the question of what it means to bear guilt for others.”

On the idea of humans suffering for others, Brisman next points to Joseph, who overlays his own suffering with redemptive purpose (Gen 45:5). Moses—though not suffering for the people—intercedes for them and rejects God’s proposal to kill them because of their sin (Exod 32:10). The most notable comparisons, however, are Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Ezekiel, embodies the suffering of exiled Israel through symbolic actions. However, he seems to reject the possibility of vicarious atonement (Ezek 18:19). Conversely, Jeremiah speaks of himself as a sacrificial lamb.

While even Brisman acknowledges that none of these examples model vicarious suffering exactly, they do show a pattern of figures who suffer and intercede in some way

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316 Brisman 298.
317 John Collins argues for another intertextual symbolic move in Isa 53: the prophet as sign (Collins 62). He asserts, “the servant is conceived after the model of Ezekiel or Jeremiah, as a prophet, whose sufferings function as symbolic action, to help his audience understand their situation and so enable them to repent and convert” (64). Collins points to Ezekiel who in 4:4-8 has the “iniquity of the house of Israel” laid upon him. Here, Collins notes, that Ezekiel refers to this as “a sign for the house of Israel” (Ezek 4:3). Thus, Ezekiel “is not a scapegoat. Rather his act is only efficacious in so far as it enables his audience, first to understand and then, consequently, to respond” (62). So too Jeremiah’s innocent suffering, and his reference to being a sacrificial lamb (Jer 11:19) does not mean he suffered vicariously for others. It is meant as a striking rhetorical/symbolic move. These connections indicate to Collins that Isa 53 is inviting Israel to think of themselves as prophetic actors in relation to the nations. “Israel, like the prophet Ezekiel, has borne their iniquities so that they might come to realize their guilt and so be converted. The nations are ‘saved’ when they acknowledge the purposes of God and respect Israel….As the prophet was to the nation Israel, so Israel is to the gentile nations” (64).
for the sake of others. These prototypes make space for exilic reflection on the human experience of suffering, leadership, and sin.\textsuperscript{318} Thus, Brisman argues that the servant is modeled on both Levitical texts and the example of previous leaders. The servant, then, becomes a scapegoat figure. Brisman concludes, “if the servant of God bears iniquity, he can be imagined not just to remove it from the shoulders of many but to carry what he removes; he himself can ‘bear it.’”\textsuperscript{319}

Within the sermon on Isa 53, the rhetorical effect of this move is two-fold. First, the preacher models a hermeneutical loop. The sermon interprets Leviticus through Jeremiah. It is as though the congregation asks, How does one conceive of sacrificial rites after the destruction of the temple? And, the preacher responds, Look at Jeremiah, who modeled the way just before exile. At the same time, the sermon interprets Jeremiah through Leviticus. The use of ʾāšām and other sacrificial language in Isa 53 develops Jeremiah’s simple simile. Here the preacher follows Jeremiah’s lead and extends his rhetorical device with language from Leviticus. In this way the preacher reads scripture backwards (from the present, through Jeremiah, and to Leviticus) and forwards (from Leviticus, through Jeremiah, and to the present) in a way that does not allow ancient past, recent past, nor present to dominate. The contemporary congregation is addressed in a way that validates the witness of sacrificial rites and listens closely to Jeremiah’s own words speaking today.

\textsuperscript{318} As Collins notes, “the prophet is providing an interpretation of Israel’s experience in the exile, and presents the servant as an individual for the sake of vividness and dramatic effect” (60).
\textsuperscript{319} Brisman 312.
The second rhetorical effect of the preacher’s use of a scapegoat figure in Isa 53 is its broad capacity to speak to the experience of suffering. On the one hand, the “servant” remains a sufferer who is only vaguely identified. Used as an earlier sermonic trope, the servant has possibly been applied to a range of individuals, to all Israel, and to groups within Israel. The effect of the trope on the hearer in Isa 53 would be to evoke numerous contexts of suffering, dehumanization, and injustice. Not naming the servant, nor even specifying it as singular or plural (i.e. collective), opens up the hearer’s imagination to contexts of suffering closest to them. So, one hearer may reflect on pre-exilic Jeremiah, another on the contemporary preacher, perhaps another on King Zedekiah, and yet another on a current group suffering in exile. On the other hand, the preacher’s reference to scapegoat rites leads the congregation to reflect about other groups of people. The hearer must ask, “Whose sin/guilt is being born away by the scapegoat? Is it mine?

For instance, reflecting on Ashkenazi’s reading of Isa 53, Alan Cooper finds the medieval rabbi to be making a homiletic move that interprets Isa 53 to reflect on Job’s biography. “The purpose of Isaiah’s servant poem, in [Ashkenazi’s] view, is to show that ‘although the Israelite nation is utterly abased, God will return them to their former heights and then some’ (86c). And Isaiah’s proof, according to Ashkenazi, comes from Job” (Alan Cooper, “The Suffering Servant and Job: A View from the Sixteenth Century” 189–200 in “As Those Who Are Taught”: The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL Claire Matthews McGinnis and Patricia K. Tull, eds., (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006) 197). Cooper then quotes Ashkenazi’s preaching: “The words of Isaiah are those that the Holy One, Blessed be He, spoke to him in prophecy, and [Isaiah] repeated them verbatim: ‘Behold, my servant shall prosper’ [Isa 52:13]. In other words, behold Job (already referred to as ‘my servant’), who was utterly abased, yet prospered and rose to the heights….It is as if God gave the prophet a sign concerning the prosperity of the messianic age: once [Isaiah] saw Job’s prosperity redoubled, it would serve as a sign that Israel’s prosperity, too, would be redoubled. (86c-d)” (197-8).

Isa 53: 1-6 reads like a congregational confession, especially verses 4-5a: “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.”
other parts of exilic Israel, the nations’ guilt, or Babylonia’s? The same group of peoples are possible when considering who benefits from the scapegoat’s work.

Furthermore, the preacher’s use of scapegoat rites in Leviticus raises questions for the hearer about the other goat. The preacher’s congregation may well know what Brisman made clear above: in the Levitical ritual, one goat is sacrificed, and the other carries the burden of sin into the wilderness. Here the exilic congregation is invited to see themselves (and others) as the scapegoat—the one driven out into the wilderness of Babylonia. Here too the congregation is invited to reflect on the sacrificed scapegoat—not the ones suffering in Babylonia, but the ones slaughtered in the temple city, Jerusalem. Such a connection is amplified by the context of Isa 49–55, which alternates from servant sermons to Zion homilies. The effect, then, is to evoke a broad reflection on suffering in multiple contexts. The preacher leads the congregation to ask, Who, as a result of the Babylonian exile, has been “marred” (52:14), “despised and rejected by others” (53:3), “acquainted with infirmity” (53:3), “afflicted” (53:4), “wounded” (53:5), “crushed” (53:5), “oppressed” (53:7), taken away “by a perversion of justice” (53:8), and “cut off from the land of the living” (53:8)?

322 Isa 53:8c: “Through the sin of my people, who deserved the punishment.”
323 Isa 53:11b: “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”
324 Isa 53:8: “By oppressive judgement he was taken away.”
325 In his analysis of Isaiah 40, Francis Landry connects the double portion that Israel pays for their sin (Isa 40) with suffering inflicted upon Jerusalem and the prophet in a way that anticipates the suffering in Isaiah 53 (Francis Landry, “Spectrality in the Prologue to Deutero-Isaiah,” 131–158 in The Desert Will Bloom: Poetic Visions in Isaiah A. Joseph Everson and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, eds., (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009) 141).
This is an open-ended homiletic approach, that includes many more experiences of suffering and oppression than the preacher, the congregation, or the reader might initially imagine. There is still space here to read Jesus.\footnote{See Gardner Taylor’s sermon below. Note also that this space for a messiah-figure is reflected in early interpretations/translations of Isa 53. For instance, William Holliday notes that the Targum presents an inclusive double message when it comes to the servant’s identity. That text reads in Isa 53:10: “They shall see the kingdom of their Messiah, they shall increase sons and daughters, they shall prolong days; those who perform the law of the Lord shall prosper in his pleasure” (William Holliday, \textit{Unbound by Time: Isaiah Still Speaks} (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2002) 136, citing Bruce D. Chilton, “Two in One: Renderings of the Book of Isaiah in Targum Jonathan,” in \textit{Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah, Studies of an Interpretative Tradition}, (ed. Craig C. Boyles and Craig A. Evans; Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 70; Leiden, 1997), 559).} But, as Jeremy Schipper has demonstrated, Isaiah 53 can also be understood to speak about other experiences of suffering, including the social ostracization of a person with a disability.\footnote{Jeremy Schipper, \textit{Disability and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant} (New York: Oxford, 2011).} Expanding upon Bernhard Duhm’s assertion that the servant had a skin disease, Schipper observes that the servant is described “with language and imagery typically associated with disability in the Hebrew Bible.”\footnote{Schipper 1.} Not all the evidence can be examined here, but notice how Schipper responds to the descriptions of suffering in Isa 53. He points out that presenting the servant as an unblemished sacrifice “ignores the fact that Isa 52:14 describes the servant as ‘marred’ (Hebrew root škht) which would render him unfit to serve as a ritual sacrifice according to Lev 22:25.”\footnote{Ibid. 47.} He highlights that it was the servant’s “appearance” and “form” that are “despised” and “rejected” in Isa 53:2-3.\footnote{Ibid. 41.} Schipper notes that Leviticus 13:22 uses “stricken”—the same word as Isaiah 53:8—to
describe the priest’s assessment of an anomaly that spreads in the skin.\textsuperscript{331} Further, that the Lord struck the servant may also indicate disability. Such action is often linked with plagues (Gen 12:17), tumors (1 Sam 5:9; 6:9) and skin anomalies (2 Kgs 15:5).\textsuperscript{332} Schipper also argues that “cut off from the land of the living” may mean excluded from able-bodied people. This is the connotation in other Hebrew texts and in ancient near eastern contexts.\textsuperscript{333} In all these ways, Schipper is responding to the expansive context of suffering that the preacher intends to evoke in Isa 53.

And, to Schipper’s credit, he also follows the preacher’s guidance to keep the text open to others’ interpretations of suffering. While he makes a strong claim for understating disability in Isaiah 53, he also states, “Yet we have not claimed that our reading of the servant is the only legitimate way to interpret the servant.”\textsuperscript{334} In fact, Schipper’s issue with previous readings of Isaiah 53 is not simply that disability was largely ignored. It is that interpretation of the servant appropriated disability language in a way that “left little room for people with disabilities to claim the servant as one of their own.”\textsuperscript{335} Like the preacher in Isa 53, Schipper wants to expand interpretations of the servant’s experience and hold them open for others’ perspectives.

\textsuperscript{331} Ibid. 33.
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid. 35.
\textsuperscript{333} Schipper 45. Compare Isa 38:11, which describes Hezekiah’s restoration to health. As to ANE references, Schipper cites a Babylonian omen that “describes a person with a skin anomaly as ‘rejected by his god (and) he is rejected by humanity’; he also highlights a line from Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld: “when Gilgamesh asks Enkidu about the fate of persons with skin anomalies in the netherworld, Enkidu informs him that they reside outside the city, with separated food” (37).
\textsuperscript{334} Ibid. 109.
\textsuperscript{335} Ibid. 110.
We noted earlier how obscure the Hebrew was in the suffering passage of Isa 53:10. In fact, Blenkinsopp acknowledges that even the earliest interpreters of Isa 53 were not sure what to make of this verse. Marc Brettler observes further about the entire Song: “Definitive answers seem to be beyond our reach.”

The preacher’s use of vague language here may suggest a different, homiletical purpose, especially when considering the literary craft demonstrated in the Song. Perhaps the preacher’s purpose is not

337 Several scholars have examined the rhetoric employed in Isa 53. Paul Raabe observes, “Of the poem’s 202 words, 118 occur more than once” (Paul Raabe, “The Effects of Repetition in the Suffering Servant Song” Journal of Biblical Literature Vol. 103, No. 1 (Mar 1984):77-81, 77). The 118 words focus on 36 different “vocables.” Raabe demonstrates that 19 of these 36 are used to emphasize the contrast between the Servant’s exaltation and humiliation and the shift in the perspective of the “we” in Isa 53:1-9 (81). Ronald Bergey builds on Raabe’s observation. He argues: "There are at least five rhetorical variations of reiteration used to emphasize the servant's sufferings and splendor: alliteration, assonance, recurrence of synonymous parallel word pairs, paronomasia, and simple repetition” (Ronald Bergey “The Rhetorical Role of Reiteration in the Suffering Servant Poem (Isa 52:13-53:12) Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 40 no. 2 (Jun 1997):177-188, 179). Anthony Ceresko looks for Exodus themes in the servant song—a “subtle evocation” of which he points to unconvincingly (Anthony Ceresko, “The Rhetorical Strategy of the Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12): Poetry and the Exodus—New Exodus” The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 56 no. 1 (Jan 1994):42-55, 54). In the process, however, Ceresko finds that Isa 53 employs a “socio-rhetorical strategy” that speaks “persuasively and graciously,” “skillfully elicits the sympathy of its hearers,” and “eloquently demonstrates” the servant’s ethos, or “moral worth” (54-5). Michael Barré examines the passage's structure, which he groups into stanzas based on meter (Michael Barré, "Textual and Rhetorical-critical Observations on the Last Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)“ The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 62 no. 1 (Jan 2000):1-27, 2). More intriguingly, Barré analyzes seven word pairs that appear at least twice in the poem and are usually reversed in the second occurrence (3). He uses this literary craft and other observations (e.g. the yaškîl connection with maškilîm in Daniel) to argue that Isa 53 presents the servant as a wisdom figure (24). Goldingay and Payne assert that the poem has an irregular meter but still clearly functions poetically. “It has poetry’s denseness and allusiveness, and a key role is played by simile and metaphor…Its word order is often not that of prose…It has many examples of parallelism…The poem makes considerable use of repetition” (278). They also note “a number of unusual idioms” and “a number of instances of asyndeton” that are used to express the conflict between suffering and triumph (279). Jim Adams focuses on the
simply to explicate Levitical sacrifices or portray a specific servant in light of Jeremiah’s example. Rather, the obscure language in this sermon could be intentionally designed to engage a broader audience to the end of congregating a larger group of hearers who might respond to the sacrificial servant trope by offering themselves as servants of the Lord. To this end, Blenkinsopp already notes, “Isaiah 53:10 serves as a link connecting the Servant of the Lord of Deutero-Isaiah (or at least Isaiah 49–55) with ‘Servants of the Lord’ of Tito-Isaiah.” Indeed, analysis of how the sermon uses rhetoric supports opening up the identity of the servant to include many people.

For instance, drawing of the work of Harold Fisch, Tod Linafelt asserts that all the Servant Songs should be understood as a “covenental discourse” that “binds Israel to God” and “provides language, symbols, and modes of speech that make Israel’s performative nature of Isaiah 53 within the whole of Second Isaiah (Jim Adams, The Performative Nature and Function of Isaiah 40–55 (New York: T & T Clark, 2006). He argues that this fourth Servant Song uses rhetoric and voice to induce the reader/hearer to a “self-involved fulfillment of the servant’s task” (195). This fulfillment is not only for one individual but for anyone who wants to engage “what it means to be Yahweh’s servant” (195). At the same time, the rhetoric of the text prompts “the rebellious to confess their sins with gratefulness and wonderment as they receive miraculous healing and restoration” (195). Finally, Brueggemann notes the rhetoric of preaching in the turn in 53:10: “Yet Yahweh.” Here Brueggemann observes, “It is Yahweh who insists that the poem continue” (148). Later, reflecting on the entire Song, Brueggemann opines, “The poem surely intends, in its endless generatively, to be reread and reheard and reembraced, always with a concrete particularity, but always with a transformative inscrutability that changes everything” (Brueggemann, Isaiah 40–66 149).

338 Blenkinsopp, “The Sacrificial Life” 5
339 For instance, H. L. Ginsberg notes that the maskilim in Daniel 11:33—12:10 are called “justifiers of the many,” which comes from Isa 53:11. Reflecting on this connection Ginsberg concludes, “the author of Daniel xi-xii has simply identified the Servant of Isa liii13—lii 12 with the Maskilim (Enlightened or Enlighteners) of his day, and the Many of the said passage with the Many of Dan xi 33, 34, etc” (H. L. Ginsberg, “The Oldest Interpretation of the Suffering Servant” Vetus Testamentum IOSOT (2013):25-28, 26). Important for our purpose is that the maskilim in Daniel appear at a moment of deliverance from empire and undoing the power of death (Dan 12:1-5).
Here the preacher employs the servant as a homiletical device; suffering becomes a reflection point; the sacrificial system is a symbolic and interpretative lens offered to the congregation, and figures like Jeremiah and Ezekiel enter as exemplars and dialogue partners. When this Servant Song is understood as preaching, the goal is no longer to nail down the servant’s identity, or to parse out doctrines of vicarious suffering. Rather, the homiletic goal of Isaiah 53 becomes fostering dialogue around suffering and resistance to domination. As Linafelt asserts,

Our consideration of each of the servant passages has shown that there is a movement from a silent community in the first passage to a community beginning to regain its power for speech in the final passage. I submit that this reflects the larger movement in the book of Isaiah from a community that does not speak or hear in the beginning to a community that engages in covenantal discourse at the end.\footnote{Linafelt, 206-7.}

In other words, Linafelt argues that the preacher uses the Servant Song sermons to foster agency and speech in the hearer. The people who needed to be reminded in Isa 42:6 that they were created to be a covenant people and a light to the nations are now given full voice in the sermon in Isa 53.

Beverly Stratton further develops the analysis of Second Isaiah’s work to foster agency and speech by reflecting on the way the Zion and Servant passages function together to elicit and empower the speech of the congregation. She notes especially how the text’s rhetoric impacts the hearer/reader:


It is this vision of the suffering servant that brings onlookers to speech in the poem. The graphic portrayal of the servant’s misery, the heaping up of terms for his anguish eventually moves those who see him to a new understanding both of what they had heard and of their own sins. Belief that had been unlikely now becomes possible because the servant’s plight requires reflection. Relationship with Yhwh may yet be restored. Unlike the city Zion who cries out to God in lament, the people in the servant poem still only speak about God, not to God….The poem suggests [however] that they may eventually come to believe (53:1). What they did not or would not hear, they will see and understand (52:15). 342

As Stratton demonstrates, Isa 53 does not function as a simple biographical or exegetical work. Rather, the Song is a rhetorical act, drawing upon biography and exegesis of sacrificial passages to impact the hearer’s speech and action. Stratton suggests further that Isa 53 continues to function in this way for contemporary hearers. Even now, the text employs engaging metaphors to lead to our own reflection and proclamation. 343

In many ways, Stratton’s findings echo David Clines’ earlier thesis. Here Clines refers to Isaiah 53 as a “language-event” that engages the audience though its use of voice and perspective—I, he, we, and they. “I” captures the voice and perspective of God, making the divine a present and speaking reality. 345 Those who hear the sermon and

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343 Stratton 229.
344 Specifically, Clines writes: “we should not think so much of a re-application of the prophetic text which once meant something quite different, but of one of the vast variety of meanings the text itself can create. The text creates a world in which participants in the world of the text get to know their way around, and come to be able to say, like Wittgenstein, ‘Now I can go on’” (David Clines, I, He, We, and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53 (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 1 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983) 59).
345 Clines shies away from clearly identifying this figure—or any figure marked by a pronoun in Isa 53. However, Clines’ description of “I” (especially in afflicting, announcing, and honoring the servant) strongly indicates divine presence (38).
identify with “they” (rabbîm in the text) stand distant from the servant concept. They are “appalled at him” (Isa 52:13) and “startled” by what the servant does (Isa 52:15). Still, they are included in the sermon—even if remaining on the periphery both textually and conceptually. Furthermore, they do reflect on the servant and even benefit from the servant’s work (Isa 53:11-12). A second group included in the Song’s preaching are the people labelled “we.” The we-group includes anyone who “accepts that the suffering of the innocent is in any way because of, for the sake of, or on behalf of, oneself who deserves to suffer.” The we-group is given voice in Isa 53:1-6 (and possibly Isa 53:7-10). This voice is centered and central to the sermon. Thus, confession is central to the sermon. As Clines asserts, “Identification with the ‘we’ puts one entirely within the world of the poem; it involves a recognition that things are not what they seem and that one can have been dreadfully mistaken about the identity and nature of the true servant of the Lord.”

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346 “If one identifies with the ‘they’, who find the history of the servant unbelievable and his aspect revolting, one is still on the edge of the poem’s world, an observer looking in on it but not committed to it. Yet the ‘they’ are at least aware of the servant; they ‘see’ and ‘ponder’ the servant’s fate” (Clines 62).

347 Clines 63.

348 I am disagreeing here, slightly, with Clines’ perspective. Clines creates a visual diagram of the Song with “he” at the center of the circle (39). I am simply arguing that “we” is the center of the structure of the sermon. It is literally, centered. “He” (the servant), however, is the overarching point of reflection that “I” speaks about, “they” distances themselves from, and “we” confess over.

349 Fredrik Hägglund argues that the “we” in the Song refers to people who viewed suffering as punishment for his own sin but who now see things differently. Referring to Isa 53:6, Hägglund asserts, “The confession in this verse opens the arms of the ‘we’, and thus opens the possibility for reconciliation between these two groups… it is not the suffering, which opens the arms, but the ‘we’-group’s confession of their responsibility for the suffering” (Fredrik Hägglund, Isaiah 53 in the Light of Homecoming after Exile (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 67).

350 Clines 63.
To illustrate what this might look like in a contemporary setting, consider Bo Lim’s recent work on Isaiah 53. He argues that Americans should interpret the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 through the lens of the marginalizing and lynching black bodies. Lim then calls the “we” to rethink and respond to black suffering across the United States. Another contemporary example comes from Marianne Moyaert who questions christological appropriation of the servant that not only excludes Jews as “they,” but ignores the confession and action required by the sermon’s “we.”

The final rhetorical group Clines identifies in this language-event is “he.” Here Clines waxes sermonic in his description:

There is yet another role in the poem which the reader is invited to assume: that of the servant himself…the poem’s lack of specificity about the servant’s identity enables a relationship between the servant and the reader that is deeper than

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351 Bo H. Lim, “The Lynching of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah: Death at the Hands of Persons Unknown,” *Ex Auditu* Vol 31 (2015): 108-120. Lim encourages the reader to see the black suffering servant as Christ (119). I interpret this move less as christological supercessionism and more as an effort to call American Christians to recognize the divine as present in and with the black sufferer.

352 Lim 119.

353 Moyaert observes, “Christians can recognize that we have focused too much on what Christ can do for us because of our faith in him, and that we have thought too little about what we must do if we are to be his disciples” (Marianne Moyaert, “Who is the Suffering Servant?: A Comparative Theological Reading of Isaiah 53 After the Shoah” 216—237 in *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*, Michelle Voss Roberts, ed., (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016) 234). Moyaert reflects on Emmanuel Levinas who argues that the Shoah drained Isaiah 53 “of all meaning” for Jews because “it paralyzes by virtue of its very intention, any flight” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1990) 12, cited by Moyaert 228). The problem here is that “A God who only commiserates allows evil to have the last word” (Moyaert 228). So too, Levinas questions Christian appropriation of Isa 53. As Moyaert summarizes Levinas’ assertion: “Christianity suffers from its forgetting of the other and the responsibility to which the subject is called. Redemption depends on us and not on a Messiah sent by God. The idea that someone else died for our sins is, according to Levinas, a dangerous idea, for it minimizes our personal responsibility (Moyaert 234, citing Michael de Saint Cheron, *Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas, 1983-1994*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010) 16).”
empathy to come into being. It is not simply that the reader may, by exercise of a vivid imagination, put himself in the servant’s shoes, and empathetically share the servant’s experience. It is rather that the figure of the servant presented by the poem has the potency to reach out from the confines of a historical past and from the poem itself and to ‘seize’ the reader and bend [them] to a new understanding of [themselves] and of the direction of [their] life.\footnote{Clines 63.}

In this sense, “he” is a pronoun that functions within the sermon to hold open the possibility for the hearer to identify with and emulate the servant. The hearer—then and now\footnote{As Clines observes, the text “exists to create another world, a world indeed that is recognizably our own, with brutality and suffering and God and a coming-to-see on the part of some, but not a world that simply once existed and is gone for good” (61).}—may identify with the servant because “he” names their own experience.\footnote{For instance, see Joel Marcus’s reflection on Isaiah 53 from a post-Shoah perspective: “when Isaiah speaks of the Lord’s servant being despised and rejected by people, he is speaking of us [i.e. Jews], who were branded as subhuman, not only by common opinion, but by law. When we hear him describe the way in which folk hid their faces from the Servant, we recall how we were turned away by our neighbors when we knocked at their doors and pleaded with them to hide us from the Gestapo, and how afterward, they claimed that they did not know what had happened to us. When he describes the Servant being led like a lamb to the slaughter, we recall our parents, our spouses, and our children, who filed so silently to the gas chambers, not daring to open their mouths” (Joel Marcus, Jesus and the Holocaust: Reflections on Suffering and Hope (New York: Double Day, 1997) 28).} Or, the hearer may even find themselves “seized” by the moment and transformed—like the Ethiopian eunuch (and Philip!) in Acts.\footnote{Speaking of the Ethiopian eunuch’s question in Acts, Clines asserts that the text itself creates a “vast variety” of meaning that invites participants to discern their place in the text’s worldview and move forward with faith and action (Clines 60). He adds further, “The poem’s very lack of specificity refuses to let it be tied down to one spot on the globe, or frozen at one point in history: it opens up the possibility that the poem can become true in a variety of circumstances—that is its work” (Clines 61).}

The dialogue Clines describes hermeneutically, Marlene Lorenson develops homiletically. Lorenson uses Mikhail Bakhtin as a lens through which to examine dialogue and carnivalesque elements of preaching. Importantly, she notes that in

Bakhtin’s understanding of dialogue “truth is regarded as something which emerges, not in the mind of an individual thinker, but in the interaction of several embodied minds.”\textsuperscript{358} In this light, it is important that the preacher “avoid conflating the voices of the listener, preacher and scripture into one and instead let the three positions interact in a way that lets them transform and enrich each other mutually.”\textsuperscript{359} To flesh out this dialogical approach, Lorensen surveys the work of homileticians like Svend Bjerg (a Dane), James Henry Harris, John McClure, and Charles Campbell—all who draw upon Bakhtinian insights.\textsuperscript{360}

Most importantly for our purposes, however, Lorensen encourages the preacher to combine Bakhtin’s understanding of dialogue as a centripetal gathering of perspectives with Bakhtin’s use of carnivalization as a centrifugal subversion of authoritative perspectives. Used within preaching, carnivalization “indicates a reversal of roles and

\textsuperscript{358} Marlene Lorensen, \textit{Preaching as Carnivalesque Dialogue—between the ‘Wholly Other’ and ‘Other-Wise’ Listeners} (Copenhagen: Grafisk-University of Copenhagen, 2012), 61, citing Bakhtin, \textit{Problem’s of Dostoevsky’s Poetics} (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1973) 81, my emphasis.
\textsuperscript{359} Lorensen 65.
\textsuperscript{360} These are helpfully summarized in O. Wesley Allen’s review of Lorensen’s work: “In Chapter Five Lorensen examines the homiletical work of Danish theologian, Svend Bjerg, who draws on Bakhtin to argue for dialogical sermons that create space for a polyphony of voices and “a mighty room of experiences” (117). Chapter Six focuses on James Henry Harris’s use of Bakhtin to reflect on the heteroglossia of African American preaching. Chapter Seven explores John S. McClure’s Other-wise Preaching and suggests ways that Bakhtin’s valuation of dialogism and the carnivalesque fit with McClure’s use of Levinas in grounding a homiletical approach that emphasizes otherness in the preaching event. In Chapter Eight, she lifts up Charles L. Campbell’s work on preaching in a liminal setting “on the street” (as opposed to preaching in a strict liturgical setting) as a model for a carnivalesque approach to the preaching assuming the role of the fool for the sake of the gospel and the dialogicity of the experience on the street with the word from scripture” (Allen, “Review of Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, \textit{Dialogical Preaching}” \textit{Homiletic} 39 no 2(2014): 49-50, 49).
hierarchies as well as a dissolution of traditional lines between actors and audience.”

Dialogical carnivalization emphasizes “dissimilarity and otherness as the driving force in communicative interaction.” And, preaching as dialogical carnivalization, “requires a mutual interaction and transformation of preacher and congregation, speaker and listener.”

Thus, through both rhetoric and exegesis, the preacher in Isa 53 can be seen using something like Lorsnesn’s “dialogical carnivalization” to dissolve traditional lines, gather together people from broad perspectives, and a mobilize them to subvert the present hierarchy. The combination of Jeremiah’s witness and Leviticus’s scapegoat ritual provides touch-points for contemporary reflection on suffering, sin, and redemption that may include the hearer’s own suffering, the suffering of a leader (like Jeremiah), the suffering of an exilic group (the scapegoat), and even the suffering of the people and land of Jerusalem (the sacrificed scapegoat). At the same time, the rhetorical use of a polyphony of voices makes space for a range of embodied responses from the congregation and seeks to include those responses as part of the collective movement forward. Not everyone will be transformed (via “he”). Not everyone will confess (via “we”). Many will remain on the outskirts and continue to reflect on suffering (via “they”). But all are brought together in the sermon to ponder the situation of suffering, consider their response, and listen for God’s word of hope and deliverance (via “I”).

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361 Lorensen 98.
362 Ibid. 192. Notice that Lorensen understands this preaching as a “carnivalesque dialogue between the Wholly Other and the Other-wise Listeners” (97).
363 Ibid. 192.
This dialogical word of action and deliverance in response to suffering is bracketed (and bolstered) by good news in Isa 53. The sermon opens with a hopeful pronouncement: “See, my servant shall prosper shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high” (52:13). The opening of this verse evokes the opening line of the first Song “See, my servant” (42:1). However, in Isa 53 the preacher advances the verb in the sentence to highlight deliverance and action: “See, shall prosper my servant.” This word can have double-meaning. “Prosper” (yaškil) makes sense in connection with the three verbs that follow it in this verse. Many commentators note that two of these three verbs evoke language used mostly for God. For instance, Isaiah’s theophany is of “the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lofty” (6:1). Now in Isa 53, the preacher applies these divine epithets to the servant. Shalom Paul argues that this emphasis on a prospering marked by exalting, elevating, and uplifting “emphasizes the servant’s overwhelming future success” even while noting the reality of suffering in 52:14. At the same time, the verb yaškil simply means “to be wise or prudent.” It has been applied to David (1 Sam 18:5) and to Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:7). Goldingay and Payne suggest that it implies one who will “act with insight and come out on top.” This word is especially powerful within the context of Isaiah 53 where the people are called in the preceding section to act by leaving Babylonia (52:11-12) and where Zion is told in the following section to make room for many more children (54:1-3).

364 See Paul 399
365 Paul 399.
366 Goldingay and Payne 288.
This insightful corporate action that will ultimately succeed entails subversion. The servant in 52:15a “startles” or “sprinkles” many people. Baltzer argues for “sprinkling” here as the best attested word in manuscripts, though he does not interpret this term sacrificially. Rather, he interprets it as a gesture of greeting similar to greeting someone with rose water in the East today. That the servant greets many nations in this way would indeed be startling given the reaction to his appearance and form (52:14). What is equally startling is that the servant engages the people of many nations (gôyîm rabbîm) before engaging kings. This rhetorical move in the text subverts the expected hierarchical order. Indeed, Baltzer sees here a “subtle criticism of Persian rule.” Such subversion—however subtle—is amplified by the preacher’s description of kings shutting their mouths. While this act could imply a shocked response or a humbled spirit, Baltzer also points to this as a gesture of honor in Persian court ceremonies. What is clear is that the kings no longer dominate the conversation. Instead they “see” and “contemplate” (52:15) what God is doing in the servant.

Similarly, at the close of the sermon the preacher points to God’s action to resist domination and to deliver the servant. Here again, Isa 53 inverts expectations. Though perceived to be a transgressor, the servant bore the sin of many (rabbîm) and made intercession for transgressors. Though kings are not mentioned here, the text repeats the

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367 Baltzer 400.
368 Ibid. 400.
370 Goldingay and Payne note this gesture could reflect “submission” (296).
371 Baltzer 399. See f.n. 74
earlier pattern of naming the many first. So too, the one who suffered for others is now glorified by God. This reversal is marked by a sermonic “therefore.” As Brueggemann preaches: “The one who was in the company of transgressors, who appeared as one of them, who prayed for them, who cast his lot as their advocate, who stood deeply in solidarity now receives the ‘therefore’ of Yahweh.”

This grace extends to the servant but also (possibly) to the many: “Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong” (53:12a). As Paul notes, there are two ways to read this first clause. Does the preacher have God say, “I shall grant him the multitude as his portion of the spoil” or is it, “I will allot him a share among the many”? The second clause can also be read in two ways: “He shall receive the multitude as his spoils” or “He shall share the spoils with the multitude.” In the first reading, the servant wins over the many. Those hearers who initially are astonished at the servant and stand at a distance eventually come to embrace the servant’s way. For a possible correlation see the servant’s work in as one who brings justice to the nations (42:1) and light to the nations (49:6). In the second understanding of this verse, the servant is treated as “many” and, as such, is given all the rights and benefits as other nations. Such an understanding might correlate Trito-Isaiah’s expansion of the mission to the nations in 56:3-8; 60:3-12; 61:5-6. Here the group of exiles identified as servant receive their “portion” and “share” among the nations. Both readings

372 Note, however, that within Isaiah one who transgresses regularly refers to exiles who reject the power, authority, and way of God. In Second Isaiah see 43:25; 43:27; 44:22; 46:8; 48:8; 50:1; 53:5; 53:8.
373 Brueggemann, Isaiah 40–66 148.
374 Paul 413.
375 Ibid. 413.
are plausible. Indeed, it is fitting that this sermon, which seeks to engage many hearers in reflection about the suffering of other(s), would close in such a pointed yet an open-ended manner.

The preacher in Isa 53 demonstrates to us both the problem of theological domination and a way to resist it through our own dialogical preaching. Here the preacher does not fall into the trap of offering a flat interpretation of suffering. This sermon engages its context by reading the exilic situation through both the sacrificial lens of Leviticus and the exemplary lens of Jeremiah. Further, the preacher uses the servant-trope, references to scapegoats, and historic servant-figures to hold open the congregation’s reflection on multiple experiences of suffering and marginalization—their own and others’. In these ways, the preacher can help Christians confront theological domination in our own day that would flatten Old Testament passages like Isa 53 into either a non-contextual reflection on sacrificial proto-christology or a prefiguration that focuses upon only one heroic individual. At the same time, the preacher of Isa 53

376 For instance, Hermann Spieckermann opts to portray the Servant in Isaiah 53 as a figure who atones for Israel’s guilt: “Prophetic suffering acquires a new sense. It becomes suffering for the guilt of others that is intended by God and the Servant together. At the same time vicarious suffering is limited to and concentrated upon the fate of a single person whose guilt has the power to wipe out guilt once for all. The dimension of prophetic suffering is thereby transcended so decisively that the Servant can no longer be identified with any particular prophetic figure. In the realm of prophecy, the Servant is to a certain extent a ‘utopian’ figure who must remain nameless because no identification can do justice to the claims about vicarious suffering” (Hermann Spieckermann, “The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament” 1—15 in The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 14). Note that this reading also erases all meaningful connections with the text’s immediate context.

377 For instance, John Oswalt argues that each of the five stanzas in the fourth Servant Song “reveals a different facet of the gem that is the Savior” (John Oswalt, “Isaiah 52:13-53:12: Servant of All” Calvin Theological Journal Vol. 40 no. 1 (Apr 2005):85-94, 90.)
wrestles in this sermon with those who do not want to look upon suffering and marginalization (the “they”) and with those who overlay it with an oppressive, victim-blaming theology (the “we”). Both of these groups are given voice, but neither has the final say. In this way the preacher in Isa 53 calls out preachers then and now who ignore suffering or who blame the sufferer for their own fate.

The effects of theological domination of the Old Testament can be seen in Jewish approaches to texts like Isaiah 53. On the one hand, rabbinic sources largely neglect this

Before he reaches this conclusion, however, he opines about Israel: “Israel’s primary problem was not physical captivity though. Its much more serious problem was the alienation from God that their sin had produced” (87). Notice how Oswalt's particular christology dominates the reading of the text such that the suffering of any exilic person or community is largely ignored.

Hans-Jürgen Hermisson argues that there is a two Servant dynamic at work in the Songs—“the prophet who preaches God’s word and Israel who receives it” (Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, “The Fourth Servant Song in the Context of Second Isaiah,” 16—47 in The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 16). Both are required for the Servant role to be fulfilled. However, Servant Israel struggles to receive the word, so the individual Servant bears their sins and functions as a “stand-in” (Stellvertreter) but not a representative (Repräsentant) of believing and suffering Israel (16). While Hermisson rejects a christological set-up here, this reading paints historical Israel as unbelieving and—perhaps even more puzzling given their exilic setting—as apparently not suffering. Such a reading of Isa 53 sets up Jewish stereotypes during Jesus day, and portends harmful suggestions about Jews beyond the time of Christ, even into the present.

For instance, Bernd Janowski presents the “we” passages in Isaiah 53 as representative of “all Israel.” Thus the effect of the passage, and especially of the divine voice in the passage is to lead all Israel to recognize that the suffering of the Servant was the result of “their sin” (Bernd Janowski, “He Bore Our Sins: Isaiah 53 and the Drama of Taking Another’s Place” 48—74 in The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 48). Janowski concludes, “Only when the ‘we’ see this can they acknowledge their guilt as well as its cancellation, becoming changed in the process” (48-9). This over-generalization about “all Israel” ignores the sermon’s use of voice that engages a wide range of hearers. It also neglects the nuance of response within Second Isaiah—e.g. Are the Servant’s disciples not also “Israel”? (c.f. 1sa 49:4-11)—and risks stereotyping all Jews, like “all Israel” as unbelieving sinners who contributed to (caused?) the death of a suffering savior.
text—especially when compared with patristic sources.\textsuperscript{380} As Joel Rembaum assess this lacuna, he suggests, “It is reasonable to view the relative silence as a form of Jewish self-censorship in the face of the Christian emphasis on the Christological meaning of such passages and as an attempt to control messianic movements and speculation among Jews.”\textsuperscript{381} Here, because of Christian theological domination, commentary is diminished, voices are muted, dialogue is squelched. This is the exact opposite of the preacher’s intention in Isa 53. And, of course, such domination led not only to Christian marginalization of Jewish voices and bodies, but to active persecution of Jews who were forced into the “we” box and made out to confess error and culpability.

Eventually, Jewish response to Christian domination took up interpretation of Isaiah 53. Responding to the persecution and loss of Jewish life around the time of the First Crusade, Rashi wrote a commentary on Isaiah 53—a text that reads much like a sermon.\textsuperscript{382} Here, Rashi holds in dialogue the singular and corporate nature of the servant. He interprets “the servant" to mean Jacob and “he shot up like a tender plant” (52:14) as a reference to Jews.\textsuperscript{383} His comments show signs of religious persecution and racism. Commenting on 52:14, Rashi writes:

As many peoples wondered about them when they saw them in their humble state, and said to one another, How marred is his [Israel’s] appearance from that

\textsuperscript{381} Rembaum 291 f.n. 5.
\textsuperscript{382} Ibid. 294.
of a man! See how their features are darker than those of other people, so, as we see with our eyes.\textsuperscript{384}

So too, Rashi holds in dialogue an approach to suffering that engages in both historicizing theodicy and sacrificial theology. When seeking to explain the situation of Jews living in diaspora in his day, Rashi asserts that “the people, because of their transgressions, were ‘cut off from the land of the living’ (53:8), that is, exiled from the land of Israel. Even the righteous among them suffered this punishment for the people’s communal guilt.”\textsuperscript{385} This analysis is not only a literal reading of parts of the text, but also—and importantly—Rashi’s reflection on his contemporary context of suffering in a foreign land. At the same time, Rashi seems to play off of dominant Christian readings of the passage. He asserts that the Jewish people suffer to atone for the sins of all humanity. “Rashi explicitly states that Israel atoned for ‘all the nations’ and that the Servant suffered so the ‘whole world might have peace’ and ‘prosperity.'”\textsuperscript{386} He writes,

\begin{quote}
But now we see that this came to him not because of his low state, but that he was chastised with pains so that all the nations be atoned for with Israel’s suffering. The illness that should rightfully have come upon us, he bore.\textsuperscript{387}
\end{quote}

Here the rabbi moves from christology to Israel-typology. “Thus, according to Rashi, the Jews, and not Jesus, suffered as a sacrifice to God and atoned for all humanity.”\textsuperscript{388} For Rashi, the servant functions as an antitype, or model, of Israel that Jews in Rashi’s day

\textsuperscript{385} Rembaum 295, citing Maarsen, \textit{Parshan-data}, 120-1; Driver-Neubauer, 1. 38; 2. 38.
\textsuperscript{386} Ibid. 297.
\textsuperscript{388} Rembaum 298.
fulfill more fully. With this interpretative move, Rashi minimizes any sense of culpability on the part of his Jewish community. Interpreting the way in which the servant was counted among transgressors (53:12), Rashi asserts, “He suffered torments as if he had sinned and transgressed, and this is because of others; he bore the sin of the many.”

Thus, Rashi’s commentary, in responding to Christian domination, engages ancient and contemporary suffering, holds the servant trope open to individual and collective application, calls out injustice, points to historical exemplars and contemporary theodicies, and offers hope to a people in the midst of persecution. In doing these things, Rashi presents a model of preaching the Old Testament that is aligned with the homiletic modeled by the preacher in Isaiah 53. It is also a model that exerts significant influence on future Jewish interpretation of this text into the present day. What Rashi does not emulate here—and perhaps cannot emulate because of Christian domination—is a dialogical model that includes multiple voices.

However, in his sermon, “The Lonely Road,” Gardner Taylor effectively engages Isaiah’s dialogical approach in chapter 53. As the title suggests, Taylor is interested in the modern experience of loneliness. This is the closest Taylor comes in this sermon to decrying dominating forces in the congregation’s life. He remarks briefly on the powers that lead us away from healthy community. He preaches, “All of us are too taken and

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390 Rembaum notes 31 author’s who follow Rashi’s lead and interpret the servant as Israel, suffering for the nations (300).
dazzled by prominence, bigness, worldly power, and splendor.” 392 Taylor calls us to resist the temptation to “bring the God who has made us before the gods we have made.” 393

Having set the theme, Taylor begins to focus on different groups and their response to the servant. He shows appreciation for the work of biblical scholars who argue that this text was not about Jesus: “I do not doubt when the authorities and scholars of the Old Testament tell us that this word was not intended, by the prophet who wrote it, to be a description of Jesus, our Lord. I have no argument with the idea that this passage, this entire chapter, for that matter, refers to the nation of Israel.” 394 It is important to state here that Taylor does not make biblical scholars into the “they” group who stand at a distance from the text and the servant. Rather, biblical scholars provide important witness that helps Taylor’s congregation understand a distinction between the servant and Jesus. As Taylor claims, Isa 53 “was talking about God’s kind of servant whom people, blinded by their own notions, would not see and would not accept.” 395

This is an important set-up that allows Taylor to depict Jesus as one who reflects on Isaiah 53 along with his congregation. Taylor preaches, “It may well be that our Lord, as he matured toward self awareness of his work as Messiah and Savior, must have looked at many models, many types of saviorhood open to him.” 396 After surveying the options, Taylor claims that Jesus decides to model his life and ministry on the servant in Isa 53. In essence, Taylor asserts that Jesus does exactly what the preacher in Isa 53

392 Ibid. 37.
393 Ibid. 37.
394 Ibid. 39.
395 Ibid. 38.
396 Ibid. 39.
wants his hearers to do—to give their life to the servant’s way. Taylor’s preaching demonstrates to the congregation, then, that Jesus’ understanding of himself is transformed by reflection on Isa 53’s “he.”

Then, Taylor uses Jesus’ appropriation of the servant as the “he” for his congregation to reflect upon. Taylor says, “All of the way to Calvary he traveled, and in the deepest places traveled alone. It was the only way he could get under all of the weary pain of lonely people.” Later, Taylor adds, “He is the Lord of the lonely.” And, again, he proclaims: “The Lord is Lord of the lonely for he knows what it is like when you have nobody. Nobody who seems to care! Nobody who understands! Nobody to even pray for you!” This example—Jesus modeling his life on the servant in Isa 53—is the “he” Taylor hopes the congregation will identify with and be transformed by. It is a turn to Jesus, but a turn to the Jesus who turns himself toward Isaiah 53.

Next, Taylor uses “we” to call the congregation to confess. He preaches, “Each of us must surely ask himself, herself, ‘Have I rejected and deserted the blessed Savior?…how many times have we cast the Lord out to his lonely way, because our comfort or our selfishness or our habits or our preferences demanded that place that the Lord Jesus asked to have for himself?’” Notice here how Taylor adapts the confession of Isa 53:1-6 to apply it to treatment of Jesus. Here Taylor makes us take on some of Isaiah’s preaching and some of the gospel’s preaching as our own voice. We have rejected. We have deserted. Taylor also expands the confession to include assessment of

397 Ibid. 41.
398 Ibid. 41.
399 Ibid. 42.
400 Ibid. 40.
our corporate identities. He preaches, “we have lost so much sense of community. We are strangers to those next door, our sick are rarely kept in the embrace of family…We have lost our tradition of the extended family.” In this way Taylor calls us to reflect on the impact of individuals and societies who reject the way of the servant.

Taylor also includes a brief note of “they” in this sermon. As stated earlier, this group is not biblical scholars. Taylor appreciates their insights. Neither does “they” describe Jews who reject interpreting the servant as Jesus. Taylor seems to find it a faithful response to Isa 53 to read the servant as Israel. For Taylor, “they” describes those close to Jesus—and by extension, close to us—who misunderstand the calling of the servant’s way of life and seek to dissuade us from following it. So, Taylor preaches, “They came for him, thinking him a little crazy with all of the talk about his mission and calling.” This little line makes space for dissenting voices while also demonstrating that even “they” reflect on the servant. In this way, Taylor follows the lead of Isa 53.

As the sermon closes, Taylor again turns to the divine perspective. Though he does not use the “I” voice, Taylor follows Isa 53 in bookending the sermon with God’s perspective. At the beginning of the sermon he preached, “I reverently pray that there is somebody here who is saying to himself or herself, ‘This day I will not demand of God, but I will put myself at God’s disposal and see how it all comes out.’” Now at the close of the sermon, Taylor proclaims, “But, blessed be God, Jesus prays for you. The Scriptures say that Christ, ‘ever liveth to make intercession’ for you….His sweet, clear

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401 Ibid. 40.
402 Ibid. 41.
403 Ibid. 37.
voice is heard before the throne in our interest. So fight on! Try on! Lonely, very lonely may be your soul sometimes, but your Lord knows what it is to be lonely, and he is praying for you.”

What Taylor accomplishes in this sermon is not simply a reimagining of Isaiah 53’s dialogical approach. Taylor seeks to draw in many people and perspectives. He wants to build community but not by imposing a persuasive uniformity upon his hearers. So, not only does Taylor address “we”, “he”, and “they,” but Taylor invites biblical scholars, Jews, skeptics, and Christian believers to be in community and conversation with each other. While Taylor makes a homiletic turn to Jesus, he does so by highlighting Jesus and his own appropriation of the text. As such, Taylor does not claim that his way is the way to read Isa 53. Rather, it is a faithful way among other faithful ways of reading the Servant Song. In taking this approach, Taylor seeks to alleviate the theological domination that has plagued Christian interpretation of Old Testament texts such as Isa 53.

Reading the final Servant Song as dialogical preaching that resists theological domination helps navigate the exegetical challenges of interpreting Isaiah 53. To be clear, it does not solve the difficulty of interpreting poetic and allusive language. Neither does it resolve the question of the way or ways in which suffering in the passage is efficacious. Nor does it definitively name the servant’s identity. This, in fact, is the point. Reading Isa 53 homiletically shows its symbolic and suggestive nature that intends to evoke a clear

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404 Taylor 42.
response and to provoke a directed reflection about suffering, domination, and hope in a wider range of hearers. Asking, “How does Isa 53 preach?,” requires that the interpreter reframe the standard exegetical questions applied to this text. It is not wrong to ask who the servant is or how one should understand suffering in this text. The preacher wants us to reflect on questions such as these. Still, it is counter to the preacher’s intentions for a hearer to take one answer to any of these questions and then close off further conversation and reflection. Understanding Isa 53 as preaching shows that the challenging, poetic language and the intentionally unanswered questions are intentionally designed to engage a broader audience with the goal of congregating a larger group of hearers who might respond to the sacrificial servant trope by offering themselves as servants of the Lord.

Not surprisingly, then, the way in which Isa 53 preaches the older testament models a dialogical hermeneutic. The preacher engages the witness of Jeremiah, who, at the precipice of exile, laments that he is like a lamb led to the slaughter. Jeremiah, then, becomes an exemplar for the congregation’s reflection on the suffering of the servant. Jeremiah also models a way to think about sacrifice outside of temple rites. At the same time, the preacher turns to sacrificial rites in Leviticus to deepen Jeremiah’s language and to expand the congregation’s imagination about who serves, who suffers, and to what end. By drawing on scapegoat language especially, the preacher is able to lead the congregation to think about their own suffering in the wilderness of Babylonia and the suffering of the sacrificed goat, Jerusalem. In this way the preacher both reads scripture backwards (from the present, through Jeremiah, and to Leviticus) and forwards (from Leviticus, through Jeremiah, and to the present) in a way that does not allow ancient past,
recent past, nor present to dominate. The contemporary congregation is addressed in a way that listens to the witness of sacrificial rites and faithfully hears Jeremiah’s own words speaking today.

Finally, the dialogical homiletic and hermeneutic modeled in Isaiah 53 highlights the challenge of theological domination in the preaching of the Old Testament. Texts such as Isaiah 53 seek to foster dialogue and emphasize the voice of numerous perspectives (both rhetorically and exegetically). Much of the way the sermon works is lost when one theological or historical interpretation dominates the conversation around the text. Much of our own preaching of biblical texts suffers when overlaid with monolithic historical constructions, monological theology, and monotone homiletic perspectives. As the preacher in Isa 53 chastises the “we” portion of the congregation who were certain that the servant suffers because he is “struck down” by God for his sins, so the preacher today would chastise we who are too certain that this text or any Old Testament text is simply a christological prefiguration, or a meditation on vicarious suffering, or a biographical sketch, or another ableist reading, or a word distant from Jewish suffering and the oppression of brown bodies.

Instead, the preacher calls us to conversation with many voices. The preacher calls us to what Lorensen terms dialogical carnivalization—the transformational interaction of preacher and congregation. The sermon in Isa 53 declares that there is room for I, he, we, and they. There is space for Jeremiah, Leviticus, Israel, Jesus, and many others. The preacher is not concerned with uniformity of opinion. Disagreement is allowed. Domination is not. Thus, the preacher lifts up the many above the monarch (52:15). The preacher uses the servant trope not to weaken the marginalized, but to
humble the ones who marginalize (“Kings shall shut their mouths,” 52:15). The preacher seeks those who are willing to suffer in order to undo the “perversion of justice” (53:8). The preacher calls for those who will speak truth to power (“there was no deceit in his mouth,” 53:9) and “share the spoils with the multitude” (53:12). In all these ways, the preacher seeks to bring many together into an embodied dialogue, to strive and to hope for deliverance from domination.

3.6. Concluding Reflections
    Interpreting the Servant Songs homiletically began as a tentative proposal, asking:

    What happens when we read these texts as sermons? More research beyond the scope of this project would be needed to demonstrate convincingly that the genre of these texts should be understood as preaching artifacts. Such research may find definite proof elusive. Preaching, after all, is an oral/aural act. No manuscript sounds, looks, or feels exactly like a sermon. And, perhaps for this reason, we know so little about oral communication in the transition between the Babylonian and Persian periods.

    Nevertheless, this chapter has demonstrated the possibility of reading the Servant Songs homiletically. On a basic level, each of the four Songs interprets older (scriptural) texts. Each song responds to the needs of the exilic context. Each Song employs rhetoric to teach, correct, gather, inspire, and/or move the audience toward action. In short, each Song preaches.

    Furthermore, applying a sermonic hermeneutic to the Servant Songs shows potential for our own interpretation and preaching of these Songs:
Reading the Songs homiletically aids interpretation of biblical texts. When Isaiah 42 is read as a sermon to an exiled and marginalized people, the preacher’s rhetoric sounds bi-vocal. Thus, the Cyrus/Israel debate is reframed. The public message of the Song allows those in power to hear Cyrus as the servant. While marginalized exiles—those who know the hidden transcript—hear a subversive, liberative word about Israel. Understanding Isaiah 49 through the lens of testimonial preaching speaks into the debate about servant Israel preaching to Israel about Israel. Testimonial forms draw on tradition and sound personal, but are ultimately designed as a way for the preacher to evoke testimony and response in hearers. Thus the sermon in Isaiah 49 seeks for Israel to engage in further conversation and action about what Israel can be in relation to its self and the world. A homiletical reading of Isaiah 50 speaks into the debate about how this passage relates to its context. The sermon here can be seen as contributing to extended imaginative reinterpretations of the book of Lamentations that, though not expositional, do reflect the Zion/geber dynamic of Lamentations. Finally, reading Isaiah 53 as dialogical preaching helps navigate the exegetical challenges of interpreting Isaiah 53 by showing that the sermon has a focus and function that seeks to evoke a clear response and to provoke a directed reflection about suffering, domination, and hope in a wider range of hearers. This dialogue reframes the debate about the servant’s biography or the (potential) use of vicarious suffering.

Reading the Songs homiletically provides models for preaching older texts in new contexts. The preacher in Isaiah 42 focuses on the language of the scripture,
especially Exodus, as that which speaks into the present moment. The God of Exodus is neither historically distant nor substantively reimagined. Rather, the preacher depicts the God of the older testament in present, active ways. The One who makes dry paths through the Sea makes waters spring up along highways through the desert. In Isaiah 49, the preacher invites the congregation to stand in the shoes of another—to imagine life through the perspective of Jacob, Moses, and Jeremiah. In this way, the preacher uses older texts to build a bridge for the congregation to envision a different future for themselves and the world. Further, by testifying in the voice of the tradition’s figure heads, the preacher also leads the congregation to participate in the preaching themselves. Isaiah 50 opens up the congregation’s imagination to the liminality of lament and hope drawn from the book of Lamentations. Some lines from Lamentations lie dormant. Here the preacher does not simply repeat an older text nor argue against it. Rather, the preacher endeavors to read key parts of the older biblical text through the lens of contemporary marginality and suffering—lamenting and hoping against the powers like a holy fool. Isaiah 53 places Jeremiah and Leviticus in dialogue with each other and the congregation. Here the preacher reads scripture backwards (from the present, through Jeremiah, and to Leviticus) and forwards (from Leviticus, through Jeremiah, and to the present) in a way that does not allow ancient past, recent past, nor present to dominate the conversation.

*Reading the Songs homiletically unmasks the contextual and hermeneutic influence of domination.* The preaching in the first Servant Song demonstrates that the Old Testament is a resource for resistance to systemic injustice. In the exilic context of
marginalization, the preacher draws on Exodus to remind the congregation that it is God—not foreign superpowers—who has called, taken, kept, and given the people in a covenant to bring justice, to bring out prisoners, and to shine light unto the nations. The preacher also invokes creation to remind marginalized hearers that they are upheld, chosen, and spirit-filled ones in whom God finds delight. These messages run directly counter to the systemic oppression and dehumanizing anthropology that Isaiah’s hearers experience through Babylonian and Persian domination. At the same time, Oscar Romero’s preaching of Isaiah 42 shows that this Servant Song speaks powerfully into modern contexts of systemic injustice in El Salvador. Romero applies the words of and about servant to his congregation, knowing that the same government that would disappear the congregation, murder priests, and impugn the Church, would also benefit if the preacher were to limit the liberative work of the servant to a single historical figure or to Christ alone. In these ways, Romero and the preach of the First Song show us how systemic injustice can dominate Old Testament preaching.

Isaiah 49 focuses on the economic depression caused by imperial neglect and intensified by decades of Babylonian marginalization. Here the preacher calls for the congregation to “bring Jacob back to YHWH,” “gather Israel,” “raise up the tribes of Jacob,” and “restore the survivors.” This is a homiletic response to the realities of human suffering. However the modern mainline sermon on Isaiah 49 (despite its fine testimonial form) struggles to interpret the physical and economic aspects of domination for its audience, relying instead on psychological and spiritual applications. Such approaches best serve those who are satisfied with the economic
status quo. Psycho-spiritual readings obscure the resonances of the text, neglect the exploited people in whom the text is interested, present no call for real change, and do not empower the congregation for restorative efforts. An approach that better reflects the Second Song’s homiletic intention is modeled in Makhosazana Nzimande’s commentary on Isaiah in light of black, South African experience: “Evidently, Europe and America have emerged as the ‘Babylonian empire’ of our time. Within this economically suicidal postapartheid context, the prophet’s anti-Babylonian political stance in Isaiah is deeply needed in leveling a sharp theological critique against capitalist exploitation of globalization and the subsequent suffering it inflicts on South African blacks.”

Nzimande’s bold word, the mainline preacher’s retreat to psycho-spiritual interpretation, and the Song’s hopeful resistance to Babylonia show us how economic injustice can dominate Old Testament preaching.

In Isaiah 50, the Servant must navigate the cultural assumptions linked to suffering brought about by Babylonian culture and interpreted within a Jewish subculture that had accommodated itself to life in Babylonian culture. This led the preacher to a radical reimagining of Lamentations as a source for identifying God’s presence in suffering and as a guide to resistance. In her preaching of Isa 50, Pauli Murray struggles against racist, sexist, and heteronormative cultural assumptions about suffering and servanthood. Through her own scrappy, poetic, prophetic preaching Murray embodies a form of suffering servanthood that opens up the possibility of a new world for black, non-binary, women and for the Church as a

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405 Nzimande 142.
whole. So too, Charles Campbell’s sermon on Isaiah 50 wrestles with the assumptions behind cultural linguistic approaches to preaching the Old Testament. He inverts traditional typology and calls the congregation to pray the Servant’s prayer as their own. Murray and Campbell, like the preacher of the Third Song, show us how cultural domination can affect Old Testament preaching.

Isaiah 53 responds to theological domination about the nature of the servant’s suffering. The preacher seeks to foster dialogue and emphasize the voice of numerous perspectives (both rhetorically and exegetically) in an effort to build unity (but not uniformity) within the exilic community around hope, resistance to injustice, and return from exile. Similarly, Rashi’s homiletical commentary on Isaiah 53 is written as a response to Christian theological domination that led to the persecution and murder of Jews during the first Crusade. Rashi does not foster dialogue in his proclamation like Isaiah 53. Rather, he injects his bold voice as a counter-voice to those who reduced the servant’s identity to Christ and sought to force all Jews into a culpable “we” voice. Gardner Taylor’s sermon on Isaiah 53 seeks to avoid repeating such abuse of the text and of Jews at the hands of Christians. He develops a dialogical approach that makes room for Rashi’s servant=Israel interpretation, acknowledges the insights of biblical scholars, depicts Jesus as one inspired by the servant-trope, and offers numerous points for his congregation to reflect on “we,” “he,” and “they.” Taylor, Rashi, and the preacher of the Fourth Song show us how theological domination can affect Old Testament preaching.
All of the Servant Songs, but especially the Fourth Song, demonstrate that if preachers are to proclaim the Old Testament faithfully they need something more than exegetical tools or a hermeneutical insight; they need more than a good text or an inspiring theme; they need more than a compelling homiletical model or an interesting sermon form; they need more than good rhetoric or a poetic turn of phrase. Preachers who want to proclaim the Old Testament faithfully need to wrestle with systemic, economic, cultural, and theological domination. Doing this work requires preachers to listen to those who are marginalized, to be in dialogue with the dominated, and to develop a way of reading and proclaiming that takes seriously the ways scripture speaks to the ancient and contemporary suffering of people. The next two chapters endeavor to pursue precisely this work.
4. Listening to Servant Israel: Alexander Deeg and Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Germany

“I still remember my mood at the time: I was amazed, confused, enthusiastic—all at once when I read this text. I read it again and again, hung onto individual sentences, found all this incredible! My blood pressure likely increased, my cheeks grew redder and redder, my theological enthusiasm grew. I meant to understand something quite rudimentary. No, what a bourgeois, banal word; I felt something, something was opened up, or theologically: something was revealed.”

In his 2017 lecture for the Konferenz Landeskirchlicher Arbeitskreise Christen und Juden (www.klak.org), Alexander Deeg offers the above description of his first encounter with Sanhedrin 98a in the Babylonian Talmud. What he narrates above happened more than 20 years ago—at a time when he was just beginning his theological studies—yet this moment clearly continues to shape his homiletic

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1 Alexander Deeg, “Wie Not-wendend ist jüdische Schriftauslegung für die kirchliche Praxis?” (Paper presented at KLAK, Berlin, Germany, January 22, 2017). NOTE: All translations are mine unless otherwise noted or indicated by an English title.
imagination. Deeg speaks and writes about it often. Indeed, the root of Deeg’s theology resides in this experience of being interrupted by the words and witnesses of Judaism.

Alexander Deeg is a homiletician and Professor of Practical Theology at Universität Leipzig. A student of Martin Nicol, Deeg has written about Dramaturgische Homiletik and on a range of practical-theological themes. His primary research interest, however, is the homiletic implications of Jewish-Christian dialogue. His dissertation engages Christian preaching and Jewish derasha. Many of his articles explore the ways

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2 Deeg also discusses this moment in Die Kirche und das Alte Testament oder: Die Hebräische Bibel zwischen Lust, Last und Leidenschaft (EvTh 2016, 10), in “Messianisch predigen Ein Nachwort” (lxi in Predigtmeditationen im christlich-jüdischen Kontext, edited by Alexander Deeg et. al. (Wernsbach: Studium in Israel, 2016; lix—lxvii), and in “Auch für dich“ und das messianische „Heute“ Überlegungen zur Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments aus homiletischer Perspektive (14).


in which a consideration of Jewish perspectives might influence Christian worship,\textsuperscript{6} theology,\textsuperscript{7} and communal identity.\textsuperscript{8}

In some ways, Deeg’s work can be seen as the continuation of German, Christian-Jewish dialogue following WWII. For instance, in the early 1960’s, the German Protestant Kirchentag held working groups on Jewish-Christian relations. At the 1963 Kirchentag, Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich and Walther Zimmerli offered lectures on the topic, and Rabbi Robert Raphael Geis argued against anti-Jewish theological polemics.\textsuperscript{9} In 1971, Rudolf Bohren called for Christian preachers of the Old Testament to “learn from the rabbi” and not to forget the context of the synagogue.\textsuperscript{10} By 1980, the Rheinische Synodalerklärung called for preachers to research texts within the context of Judaism as a way of better understanding the Old Testament and better penetrating the meaning of the New Testament.\textsuperscript{11} And 16 years later, Axel Denecke argued that Christians have much to


\textsuperscript{10} Rudolf Bohren, \textit{Predigtlehre (München: Chr. Kaiser,} 1971), 121.

\textsuperscript{11} Deeg reports that they said: "Since scripture has its origin in the history of the Jewish people, in its faith, thought and action, Christians must learn to listen to the voice of Jewish scripture. They do well \textit{in the interest of a more penetrating understanding of the}
learn hermeneutically and rhetorically from Jews who have been reading and speaking about these texts twice as long as Christians.\textsuperscript{12} Around this same time, a preaching periodical drawing upon Jewish sources began to be offered as a sermon resource for German pastors.\textsuperscript{13} As of 2017, there are 21 volumes in print, which Deeg analyzes in the same lecture quoted above.\textsuperscript{14}

Particularly influential on Deeg’s thought are works by Horst Dietrich Preuß and Heinz-Günther Schöttler. Preuß argues against Christian supercessionist readings of the Old Testament, especially those seen in allegory and traditional christological readings. Instead, he proposes that the Testaments be connected to each other by a “structural analogy.”\textsuperscript{15} With this term, Preuß means that the formal structure of biblical stories is similar, or analogous.\textsuperscript{16} And, it is in this structure that one finds scripture’s meaning, its

\textsuperscript{12} See Axel Denecke, \textit{Als Christ in der Judenschule. Grundsätzliche und praktische Überlegungen zum christlich-jüdischen Gespräch und zur Rede vor Gott} (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1999). Deeg claims, “Axel Denecke recognizes that numerous other suggestions for the content and formal reformation of the sermon could be gained from the perception of Jewish preaching and hermeneutics, and writes: "[...] the Jewish experience of the success and failure of the speech of God is twice as old as the Christian. It is really surprising that until now, as far as I can see, and I think I have looked around everywhere, no one has ever come upon the idea of going to the Jewish school here as a homiletic guide of Jewish Rhetoric for our sermon” (cited in Alexander Deeg, “Wie Not-wendend…” Paper presented at KLAK, Berlin, Germany, January 22, 2017).
\textsuperscript{15} Preuß, Horst Dietrich, \textit{Das Alte Testament in christlicher Predigt} (Berlin: W. Kohlhammer, 1984), 121.
\textsuperscript{16} Preuß 121.
inter-Testamental connections, and its relationship to today.\textsuperscript{17} Effectively, Preuß shifts from a theological typology to a formal typology. Old Testament texts exhibit a structure similar to the way humans experience life and death, with faith and doubt, struggle and divine intervention. What Deeg seems to appreciate about Preuß is the attempt to place the Old Testament on equal footing with the New Testament. For instance, Preuß argues that the Old Testament is not an empty area waiting to be filled by the New Testament,\textsuperscript{18} but that both the Old Testament and New Testament correlate and correct each other.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, while Preuß allows for cruciform readings of the Old Testament, he asserts that scripture does not lead only there. Rather its interpretation leads to many other meanings…and also to the cross.\textsuperscript{20} Despite these positive assessments, Deeg raises questions about what exactly Preuß’s “structural analogy” accomplishes for preaching in light of Jewish-Christian relations. Specifically, Deeg wonders whether Preuß’s approach would actually help make the “challenging and changing Jewish voice audible.”\textsuperscript{21}

Heinz-Gunther Schöttler’s work argues that Christian preaching of the Old Testament should remember that the Testament is Israel’s Bible first.\textsuperscript{22} He proposes that in addition to christological readings, interpreters should focus on the one-ness of God, whom Jews and Christians both worship.\textsuperscript{23} He asserts further that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Preuß 122.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Preuß 122.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Preuß 130.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Preuß 139.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Deeg, “Wie Not-wendend…” Berlin, January 22, 2017. At issue here is whether structural analogy turns specific perspectives into generic forms to be applied universally.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Schöttler 624.
\end{itemize}
Christian preaching on Old Testament texts cannot and should not be based on the Christian view and tradition alone. It must reintroduce the Jewish testimony of faith into the proclamation as a testimony to faith in the one God, which is now lived and indispensable. [...] This ‘new’ preaching way in which Christians can truly participate in the faith of Israel must become so self-evident in the Church that the traditional christological relativization of the Bible of Israel becomes questionable.  

The implication of this assertion is that Jewish interpretations are helpful—and even necessary—for Christian proclamation of the Old Testament. Schöttler envisions Jewish Torah-theology and Christian soteriology in conversation with each other. Deeg also finds in Schöttler a key insight: “Schöttler's perception of Jewish interpretation of the Scriptures is much more connected than merely a stimulus or enrichment, but a theologically necessary inclusion of the Jewish context because it is the context in which 'we' are included as Christians.” Still, Deeg cautions that we need to make some distinction between Israel and ourselves. “We are not simply 'Israel' — and therefore cannot simply write us and our situation into these texts in a 'structure-analogy' way…. these texts also speak to us, which is, however, only hermeneutically justified, if they are perceived at the same time [to be] ‘Israel-sensitive.’”

24 „Christliche Predigt über alttestamentliche Texte kann und darf sich nicht (‚mehr‘) allein auf die christliche Sicht und Tradition stützen. Sie muß das gelebte jüdische Glaubenszeugnis in die Verkündigung wieder als ein heute gelebtes und unverzichtbares Zeugnis für den Glauben an einen Gott einbeziehen. [...] Diese ,neue‘ Predigtweise, bei der die ChristInnen am Glauben Israels wahrhaft partizipieren dürfen, muß in der Kirche so selbstverständlich werden, wie die traditionale christologische Relativierung der Bibel Israels fraglich geworden ist“ (Schöttler 372).

25 Schöttler 633.


4.1. From Conciliation to Transformation
While Deeg clearly appreciates and draws upon the insights of Schöttler, Preuß, and others, his own work pushes beyond methodological recalculations and theologically conciliatory gestures. Deeg seeks to transform individual, communal, and institutional Christian relationships with Judaism and with the scripture that Jews and Christians hold in common. To better understand this point it is important to return to Deeg’s initial experience of reading Sanhedrin 98a in the Babylonian Talmud. This passage recounts a scene wherein Rabbi Joshua b. Levi meets the prophet, Elijah.

Rabbi Joshua asks Elijah, 'When will the Messiah come?'
—‘Go and ask him himself,’ was his reply.
'Where is he sitting?'
—‘At the entrance of the town [i.e. the city of Rome].’
‘And by what sign may I recognize him?’
—‘He is sitting among the poor lepers: all of them untie [their bandages] all at once, and re-bandage them together, whereas he unties and re-bandages each separately, [before treating the next], thinking, should I be wanted, [it being time for my appearance as the Messiah] I must not be delayed [through having to bandage a number of sores].’
So he went to him and greeted him, saying, ‘Peace upon thee, Master and Teacher.’
—‘Peace upon thee, O son of Levi,’ he replied.
‘When wilt thou come Master?’ asked he,
—‘Today’, was his answer.
On his returning to Elijah, the latter enquired, ‘What did he say to thee?’
—‘Peace Upon thee, O son of Levi,’ he answered.
Thereupon he [Elijah] observed, ‘He thereby assured thee and thy father of [a portion in] the world to come.’
—‘He spoke falsely to me,’ he rejoined, ‘stating that he would come today, but has not.’
He [Elijah] answered him, ‘This is what he said to thee, Today, if you will hear his voice.’ (Ps 95:7).

Deeg calls his initial experience reading this text an *epiphany*. The normal course of studying historical texts was interrupted and, “Something was revealed.” No longer was
Deeg the master of his material. Rather, this Jewish text began to hold a mastery, or power, over him.

Deeg’s account of reading Sanhedrin 98a highlights three important aspects of his homiletic hermeneutic. First, as Deeg experienced interruption and epiphany in his reading of Jewish texts, so he calls for Christian preachers to engage (or be engaged by!) Jewish hermeneutics as more than a mere source for Christian interpretation. Christian worship should be conducted with a cognizance of Israel’s real presence.\(^{28}\) Christian sermons should allow Jewish voices to feature prominently and independently—including the Jewish “no” to our theological claims.\(^ {29}\)

Second, as Rabbi Joshua is asked to examine more closely what is often overlooked, i.e. the poor and sick, so Deeg calls for Christian interpreters to follow rabbinic examples of detailed and open-minded observation. He refers to this hermeneutic as “imagination and meticulousness.”\(^ {30}\) Every letter, word, gap, and unanswered question holds a surfeit of possibility for the interpreter that can be answered (but not solved!) linguistically, contextually, theologically, or extra-biblically—and always also, dialogically.

Third, such a hermeneutic invites an awareness of the ways political, economic, cultural, and theological power affects interpretation. Elijah sends Rabbi Joshua to


\(^{29}\) e.g. Alexander Deeg, “Disruption, Initiation, and Staging: The Theological Challenge of Christian Preaching.” Paper presented at the University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, October 5, 2011.

discern God’s work among the poor and sick at the gates of Rome. This symbol of the empire’s oppression, violence, and greed becomes the site where the messiah is found. Deeg’s work also sends interpreters to that which the gates of Rome symbolize. He calls attention to the Jewish victims of a failed empire that perpetrated the Shoah. He questions dominant Christian culture that tends either to engage in a pietistic co-opting of Jewish texts or in a historicizing dismissal of these texts as largely irrelevant to current needs and interests. Instead, Deeg seeks out that liminal space where Jews and Christians can engage in mutually affecting (and respecting) dialogue. Such dialogue, like that of Elijah with Rabbi Joshua, will inevitably lead to a reconsideration of our assumptions about the messiah in light of what we encounter today.

What Deeg means by all of this, and what his critiques, insights, and approaches to preaching mean for Old Testament hermeneutics and homiletics is the subject of the remainder of this chapter. Section one will examine Deeg’s work to create space within dominant Christian cultural assumptions for Old Testament perspectives and hermeneutic dialogue with Jews. Section two highlights Jewish hermeneutic and theological approaches that Deeg finds particularly helpful for Christian preachers. Section three

examines some of Deeg’s homiletic proposals for preaching the Old Testament and for using Jewish sources in sermons. A final section will summarize and evaluate our findings.

4.2. Creating Space for Dialogue

On a basic level, the parameters for any dialogue require that there be an agreed upon subject. While there are many possibilities for Jewish-Christian dialogue, one of the most fruitful possibilities would be to discuss the scriptures that Jews and Christians hold in common. However, this proposal immediately encounters difficulties. First, Christians have not often read, much less preached upon, these scriptures. And, second, when Christians have read and preached the Old Testament these readings have frequently taken a form that would undercut much of the basis for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

As a remedy to the first issue, Deeg and his colleagues at KLAK published a lectionary in 2009 that proposed an increase of Old Testament readings in the lectionary and a reduction of New Testament readings: three Old Testament texts per proper and only two New Testament texts. The KLAK website explains their objective as “die Texte der Bibel in fünf Gruppen zu sortieren und für jeden Sonn- und Feiertag einen Text aus jeder Textgruppe vorzuschlagen: Tora, Propheten, Schriften, Evangelium und Epistel.”  

This publication influenced the working group for the new German Protestant lectionary, which took effect in Advent 2018. While the new German Protestant Lectionary does not fully adopt the KLAK suggestions, it does double the amount of Old Testament

35 Note that Deeg also served on the lectionary revision working group for the German Protestant Church.
preaching texts, usually including two Old Testament readings along with two Epistle and two Gospel readings. While all six lections will not be read each Sunday, and while the preacher/congregation is free to select which lections will be read, the intention of both KLAK and the lectionary revision working group is “that at least one text from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament will be heard in the worship service.”

Of course, the hopes and intentions of a body of religious leaders does not guarantee changes in text selection and interpretation. Nevertheless, the new lectionary is a vast improvement on the old. Here Deeg observes, “the KLAK model comes much closer to the factual quantitative relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament, than does the previously accepted lectionary order.” Furthermore, the KLAK lectionary eliminates the situation found in the previous lectionary wherein the Old Testament was omitted for seasons of the church year in favor of Gospel and Epistle preaching texts. As Deeg asserts, “The renewal of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is only possible if both the connecting text of the Old or First Testament, the Jewish TaNaKh,

36 The new German Protestant Lectionary increases Old Testament readings from 17% of the total lections to 33%. This is in addition to recommended texts for liturgical use. Compare this to the Revised Common Lectionary, which Robert Wozniak estimates uses only “6 percent of the Old Testament (not counting the Psalms)” (Robert Woznak, *An introduction to the Homily* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 75).
have been read or preached in a broader range than in the past, and thus reflected in theological reflection and anchored in the consciousness of the communities.\footnote{“Die Erneuerung des Verhältnisses von Christentum und Judentum ist nur möglich, wenn auch der beide verbindende Text, das Alte bzw. Erste Testament, der jüdische TaNaKh, in breiterer Auswahl als bisher gelesen bzw. gepredigt und so in der theologischen Reflexion bedacht und im Bewusstsein der Gemeinden verankert wird.” (“Die Kirche und das Alte Testament,” Lecture on December 9, 2015 in Berlin and on February 3, 2016 in Augsburg).}

At the same time, such a sentiment implies that merely increasing Old Testament lections is not sufficient. If the goal is to renew and strengthen a Jewish-Christian relationship, then the selection criteria and hermeneutic pairing of Old Testament and New Testament must be examined critically. Here, the KLAK—or at least Deeg—seems to acknowledge that more work could be done. Speaking of the previous lectionary, Deeg observes that texts from the Old Testament were not selected based upon their own logic or perspective. Rather, they were chosen based on their perceived connection with Gospel texts. This meant that the primary Old Testament lections were drawn from Isaiah 40—66.\footnote{“Die alttestamentlichen Texte wurden ja nicht von der Logik des Alten Testaments und seines vielfältigen Redens ausgehend gewählt, sondern ausgehend von neutestamentlichen Texten (vor allem von den die Proprien ’regierenden’ Evangelien). So liegt derzeit Perikopenordnung vor, die zweifellos einen christologischen und soteriologischen Schwerpunkt hat, wodurch das reformatorische Anliegen, die ganze Bibel als Gottes Wort und die Kirche immer neu als creatura verbi wahrzunehmen, zurückgedrängt wird. Für die Auswahl aus dem Alten Testament bedeutete dies bislang, dass vor allem Texte aus dem Propheten Jesaja (hier wiederum besonders aus Jes 40–66) aufgenommen wurden” (“Die Kirche und das Alte Testament,” Lecture on December 9, 2015 in Berlin and on February 3, 2016 in Augsburg).} In the new lectionary, however, Deeg acknowledges,

This focus has not been altered in the revision, but has been relativized by the fact that many texts have been added to these texts: especially narrative texts from the Pentateuch, wisdom texts, but also differently accentuated prophetic texts. However, a fundamental reorientation of hermeneutics is also not present in the
lectionary revision, since the gospel readings still determine the sound space of a Sunday or holiday (emphasis added). 41

This observation points to the second difficulty of using readings from the Old Testament as the basis for Jewish-Christian dialogue: Christian interpretations of these texts have often been less than helpful for such purposes. The KLAK acknowledges as much when they describe the changes brought about with the enlightenment, Schleiermacher, and National Socialism. 42 But here is where Deeg’s work becomes especially salient. Deeg observes that Christians have tended to engage in either a pietistic co-opting of Jewish texts or in a historicizing move that dismisses these texts as largely irrelevant to Christian needs and interests.

4.2.1. Old Testament Pietism

Deeg frames the co-opting of the Old Testament as an unintentionally harmful
continuation of “19th century kitsch.” Its roots lie in old German pietism. As Peter
Zimmerling shows in his book, Die Losungen: eine Erfolgsgeschichte durch die
Jahrhunderte, since the time of Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) “Old
Testament” passages have been turned into slogans (“Losungen”) and paired with New
Testament readings. By the 20th century and continuing today, these pairings were
codified and widely distributed for daily reading. The sloganized Old Testament also
regularly appears in baptismal sayings, proverbs, blessings at confirmations, and at
burials. Examples include passages like Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my shepherd…”) and
Psalm 91:11 (“For he will command his angels concerning you…”).

Deeg notes that the distribution and continued use of a sloganized Old Testament
invariably affects its interpretation. It creates the impression that Old Testament texts
have been solved for Christian readers. Furthermore, by turning these “solved” Old
Testament texts into a “daily intellectual-spiritual vademecum,” Protestant pietism made
the meaning of the text appear “self-evident.” The danger here, as Deeg understands it,

43 Alexander Deeg, “‘Auch für dich’ und das messianische ‘Heute’: Überlegung zur
Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments aus homiletischer Perspektive,” in: Markus Witte and
44 Peter Zimerling, Die Losungen: eine Erfolgsgeschichte durch die Jahrhunderte.
45 Alexander Deeg, “‘Auch für dich’ und das messianische ‘Heute’: Überlegung zur
Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments aus homiletischer Perspektive,” 7.
46 “Die Kirche und das Alte Testament,” Lecture on December 9, 2015 in Berlin and on
February 3, 2016 in Augsburg.
47 As will be noted below, this “self-evident” reading held no place for consideration of
ancient Israel or modern Judaism. “Für die zahlreichen Leserinnen und Leser der
can not only be seen where Christians are arrogantly exalting over the Old Testament, or where the New Testament with its witness to Christ is prescribed to be more true than the Old Testament predecessor, but also where Christians in friendly carelessness adopt captivating and versatile texts, without considering that these texts are not their own and they are not the (primary) addressees. They are texts that address Israel and are currently addressing Jewish women and men (emphasis added).

The problem with Protestant pietism, then, is something more subtle than unabashed anti-semitism yet more broadly distributed than even supersessionist theologies. The problem is that in its very efforts to engage the Old Testament and interpret these texts powerfully for Christian believers, Protestant pietism thoughtlessly disengages the text from its original Jewish audience while also unwittingly disenfranchising present-day Jewish interpreters of the text.

Consider Protestant pietism’s treatment of Isaiah 43:1. Here the text reads:

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

Losungen gehören alttestamentarische Texte so selbstverständlich und ohne komplexe Israel-theologische Überlegungen zum täglichen geistig-geistlichen Vademekum und prägen evangelische Frömmigkeit” (“Auch für dich’ und das messianische ‘Heute’: Überlegung zur Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments aus homiletischer Perspektive,” 7).

However, the interpretation that pietism gives to this text treats all second-person singular pronouns as references to the Christian believer. The problem here is not that “Christian” is read along with Israel. Rather, as Deeg observes, “In church usage, the introduction, which clearly addresses this saying to Jacob/Israel, has been simply eliminated up to now—and the text so universalized contrary to its wording.”\(^{49}\) Thus a text about God’s faithfulness to and redemption of Israel is now read within certain forms of pietism as an implicit judgment on Judaism and an announcement of the divine election of the Christian.

### 4.2.2. The Old Testament and Historical Criticism

Pietism is not the only challenge, of course. Historical readings, as a continuation of especially 19th century hermeneutics, assert that one must read the text, and each redaction of it, in its proper historical context. One the one hand, these approaches can provide many helpful insights. For instance, historical critical scholarship shows that Isaiah 43:1 is part of deutero-Isaiah and written for Jews within an exilic setting. As Joseph Blenkinsopp asserts, topographical allusions and cultural markers within Isaiah 40–48 indicate that the primary audience for these chapters was Judeo-Babylonians, probably from the Nippur region, along with Judeans from northern Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Asia Minor.\(^{50}\) In other words, Isaiah 43:1 should be distinguished from earlier perspectives addressed by Isaiah of Jerusalem to a different audience.

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\(^{49}\) In der kirchlichen Verwendung aber wird die Einleitung, die diesen Spruch eindeutig an Jakob/Israel adressiert, bislang schlicht eliminiert—und der text so entgegen seinem Wortlaut universalisiert” (Deeg, “‘Auch für dich’ und das messianische ‘Heute’: Überlegung zur Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments aus homiletischer Perspektive,” 8).

Furthermore, scholars within the history of religion movement argue that deutero-Isaiah is not referring to Christians or to Christ. Those insights are added much later by the New Testament.

Here historical criticism offers an important corrective to subjective spiritualized readings of scripture seen especially in Christian pietism. Historical criticism does this by developing tools for research that continue to be invaluable to the examination of biblical texts and contexts. Without a doubt, source, form, and redaction criticism along with comparative Ancient Near Eastern studies—just to name a few tools of research—help interpreters to understand more about the biblical text and world than ever before. At the same time, however, these research tools are often accompanied by a troubling conception of history and religion.

This issue is illustrated most clearly with a recent German controversy about the place of the Old Testament in the church. Notger Slenczka, a systematic theologian at Humboldt University in Berlin, published an article in 2013 that draws on Friederich Schleiermacher, Adolf von Harnack, and Rudolf Bultmann in its attempt to locate the Old Testament in its proper historical context. By focusing upon the historic location of the texts and engaging in a history-of-religion worldview, Slenczka argues simply that the Old Testament cannot be read christologically because these texts are pre-christian.51 Furthermore, since the Old Testament is pre-christian, and since it has been little used in the (German) Church, Slenczka feels justified claiming that the Old Testament is not a

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document that constitutes the Church.\footnote{“Dies genau ist die Pointe, die, so scheint mir, allein einen religiösen Zugriff auf das Alte Testament als Buch der Kirche erlaubt. Sobald sich das Bewusstsein ausbildet, dass dieses Buch nicht von der Kirche, sondern von einer Religionsgemeinschaft handelt und zu ihr spricht, von der sich die Kirche getrennt hat, wird das Verhältnis der Kirche zu diesem Schriftenkorpus hochproblematisch: Es handelt sich eben von vornherein nicht mehr um ein unmittelbar in die eigene Geschichte hineinredendes Buch, sondern um die Identität stiftende Urkunde einer anderen Religionsgemeinschaft. Dieses Bewusstsein der Unterscheidung von Kirche und Judentum als zweier Religionsgemeinschaften hat sich – jedenfalls in der abendländischen Christenheit – durchgesetzt und auch in der Deutung des Verhältnisses der Urchristenheit zum zeitgenössischen Judentum niedergeschlagen. Damit wird aber das Alte Testament zu einem Dokument einer Religionsgemeinschaft, die mit der Kirche nicht identisch ist” (Slenzcka 118).} According to him, the Old Testament does not shape church practice, and there is significant theological dissonance between the New Testament and the Old Testament. He finds the Old Testament’s understanding of
salvation,\textsuperscript{53} particularity,\textsuperscript{54} and its use of violence\textsuperscript{55} to be especially discontinuous with the New Testament. As such, he argues that Christians should think of the Old Testament as the “gospel for the Jews.”\textsuperscript{56} For Christians, however, the Old Testament is merely historical background—useful but not required reading. In fact, Slenczka argues, “the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} “Dies gilt umso mehr, als die Entfremdung des christlichen Glaubens von seiner Vorgeschichte nicht nur darin begründet liegt, dass die gegenwärtige Kirche – eigentlich bereits Luther in seinem 'Unterricht, wie sich die Christen in Mose so lllen schicken’ – nicht mehr fähig ist, die heilsgeschichtliche Kontinuität zwischen der im AT und der im New Testament dokumentierten Ereignisfolge so wie Paulus und so wie die vornezeitlichen Theologen der Alten Kirche zu konzipieren. Diese Fremdheit ist vielmehr die Folge der Fremdheit der Texte, die Schleiermacher ebenso wie Harnack identifiziert hat: Wenn jemand ernhaft die Texte des Alten Testaments in ihrer Gänze liest und überschaut, wird er oder sie sich nur in engen Grenzen dazu imstande sehen, sie als Ausdruck des Gottesverhältnisses zu lesen und zu verstehen, das sein christlich-religiöses Bewusstsein ausspricht und das er in den Texten des New Testament wiederkennen und begründet sehen kann” (Slenczka 119).
\item \textsuperscript{54} “In seiner Gänze ist das AT kein Zeugnis der Universalität des Gottesverhältnisses, sondern ein Zeugnis einer Stammesreligion mit partikularem Anspruch” (Slenczka 94). See also, “Und genau dies ist die Prämisse der These, dass das AT zwar zur Vorgeschichte des Christentums unverzichtbar gehört, dieses Ergebnis (das Christentum) aber dazu bestimmt ist, sich im Laufe einer Entwicklung seiner selbst bewusst zu werden und sich von diesen partikularen Voraussetzungen abzulösen: Dieser Zeitpunkt der Verselbständigung des universalen religiösen Gedankens von seiner partikulare gebundenen Vorgeschichte sei – dies ist die Diagnose Harnacks, eigentlich schon in der Reformation, sicher aber in seiner Gegenwart gekommen” (Slenczka 93).
\item \textsuperscript{55} Deeg counters that Slenczka’s understanding of violence is too simplistic. For instance, Slenczka does not acknowledge that violence is often used—c.f. plagues—to demonstrate that revenge on enemies is for God alone. Deeg writes, “Gerade in der praktischen Verwendung des Alten Testaments hat sich in den vergangenen Jahren gezeigt, wie wichtig die bislang vielfach als problematisch bezeichneten Texte sind. Dafür steht etwa die Karriere der Klagepsalmen in der Seelsorge: Die Feinde zu benennen, Rachewünsche zu artikulieren und am Ende doch zu wissen, dass die Rache allein Gottes ist, ist eine Bewegung, die sich gerade an alttestamentlichen Texten lernen lässt und die auch die christliche Predigt vor einem allzu einfachen Gottesbild des immer nur lieben Gottes bewahren kann” (Deeg, “Die Kirche und das Alte Testament” 6).
\item \textsuperscript{56} Slenczka 108.
\end{itemize}
texts of the Old Testament deserve selective appreciation and also religious use, but not canonical rank!“\textsuperscript{57}

As Deeg highlights, the problems with Slenczka’s approach are manifold. First, Deeg argues that despite a stated interest in history, Slenczka’s approach to the Bible actually eliminates important aspects of history.

In the paradigm of the historical—as paradoxical as it sounds—the aspect of history is lost. Namely, history is not the result of historical reconstruction, with its criteria (analogy, correlation) developed by Troeltsch and others, but the individual or communal narrative construction, to which experience and self involvement belong, and for which countless examples from the history of preaching and Piety show.\textsuperscript{58}

In other words, Slenczka’s proposed elimination of the canonicity of three-fourths of the Bible under the guise of history is, in itself, an attack upon and an erasure of the nearly 1800-year history of Christian construals of scripture. Thus, under the guise of accurately articulating history Slenczka seeks to eliminate (rather than merely critique) the Christian history of reading and valuing the Old Testament.

Second, Deeg asserts that by employing a history of religion schema, Slenczka subjectivizes scripture by portraying the Old Testament as a collection of moments in a less enlightened, earlier time. The Old Testament becomes a snapshot of what we once thought, but no longer do. In this way, Slenczka creates a historical gulf between the Old

\textsuperscript{57} Slenczka 119.
\textsuperscript{58} “Im Paradigma des Historischen geht – so paradox es klingt – der Aspekt der Geschichte verloren. Geschichte nämlich ist nicht das Ergebnis historischer Rekonstruktion mit ihren von Troeltsch und anderen herausgearbeiteten Kriterien (Analogie, Korrelation), sondern die individuelle oder gemeinschaftliche narrative Konstruktion, zu der Erfahrung und eigenes Involviertsein gehören und für die sich unzählige Beispiele aus der Geschichte der Predigt und der Frömmigkeit anführen ließen” (Deeg, “Die Kirche und das Alte Testament” 5).
Testament and today that dissolves the efficacy of these texts. Note, Slenczka does not proffer that the Greek New Testament is historically distant, even though it was composed only a few hundred years after the final redactions of the Old Testament. This points to a third critique of Slenczka. Deeg assesses that Slenczka’s real guiding principle is not history but a dogmatic conception of proper religion that would seek to limit, control, and/or eliminate contrarian viewpoints.

If it were indeed the case that at a desk in Berlin the Christian-pious self-consciousness had come to its climax, and therefore theology could now judge which texts would continue to be kept in view as canon and which would not, future generations and other Churches/communities would no longer have the chance for these multifarious canon productions and receptions. Instead, a dogmatic principle would take the place of the canon, and the plurality of the ever-new canon reception would be ended. The theological knowledge of a particular time, a particular school, or a particular theologian would presume to determine the Christian (or his being) validly for all.

The problem here is that in a very literal sense, Slenczka is not being scriptural in his theological/historical reading of scripture. He is not allowing for the validity of multiple, differing viewpoints in the way that scripture (and Church tradition) does.

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60 “Wenn es tatsächlich so wäre, dass an einem Schreibtisch in Berlin das christlich-fromme Selbstbewusstsein zu seinem Höhepunkt gekommen wäre und daher die Theologie nun beurteilen könnte, welche Texte man als Kanon weiterhin im Blick behalten wolle und welche nicht, hätten künftige Generationen und andere Kirchen/Gemeinschaften die Chance dieser vielfältigen Kanonproduktionen und -rezeptionen eben nicht mehr. Stattdessen träte ein dogmatisches Prinzip an die Stelle des Kanons, und die Pluralität der immer neuen kannrezeptionen wäre beendet. Die theologische Erkenntnis einer bestimmten Zeit, einer bestimmten Schule oder eines bestimmten Theologen würde sich anmaßen, nun und für alle gültig das Christliche (oder sein ‘Wesen’) zu bestimmen” (Faktische Kanones 279).
On this point Deeg might strengthen his argument by attending more overtly to dynamics of power and privilege.\textsuperscript{61} Slenczka is not merely being dogmatic. He seems blind to the ways his own culture and context affect his assumptions and assessments. For instance, is it really the case that the Church does not read and use the Old Testament? Surely Slenczka knows that the Old Testament features prominently in many aspects of liberation theology, in various forms of African American preaching, and in significant numbers of African and Asian faith communities. That Slenczka does not engage with these contexts points to his norming and universalizing of parochial German perspectives of faith and practice. The fact that he would do all this while referring to the Old Testament and Jewish faith as tribal and particularist shows just how blind Slenczka is to his own position. Most alarming, however, is that any of this would be done by a scholar at Humboldt University. Just a few blocks from Notger Slenczka’s office, on Bebelplatz, is the memorial marking a site where National Socialists destroyed 20,000 books—many from Jewish authors. The books were taken off the library’s shelves and burned because they were deemed no longer useful to (Nazi) German ways of thinking. To be clear, Slenczka is not making the same argument, and yet his perspective is similar enough to

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\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, Deeg’s assessment is too understated when he writes, “It seems to me annoying that Notger Slenczka is indeed of the opinion that he can take a helpful step in the Christian-Jewish dialogue by relinquishing the Old Testament to its real proprietors, the Jews, and claiming that this book is also called Christian book with fundamental theological relevance (and not just historical interest!) - and thus as a canonical book.”: “Ärgerlich erscheint mir, dass Notger Slenczka wohl tatsächlich der Meinung ist, im christlich-jüdischen Dialog einen hilfreichen Schritt zu gehen, indem er das Alte Testament seinen eigentlichen Eigentümern, den Jüdinnen und Juden, zurück- und den Anspruch aufgibt, dieses Buch auch als christliches Buch mit grundlegender theologischer Relevanz (und nicht nur historischem Interesse!)—und damit als kanonisches Buch—zu lesen” (Faktische Kanones 280).
\end{flushright}
merit comparison and—one would hope—greater reflection on the use and abuse of power in his own writing.

Furthermore, it hardly needs to be said that the perspectives expressed by Slenczka are not limited to a desk in Berlin. Marc Brettler observes that early Jewish responses to historical-criticism in Germany and in the United States were decidedly negative. In a speech at Jewish Theological Seminary in 1903, Solomon Schechter equates Higher-Criticism with Higher anti-Semitism: “The genesis of this Higher anti-Semitism is partly, though not entirely…contemporaneous with the genesis of the so-called Higher criticism of the Bible. Wellhausen’s Prolegomena and History are teeming with aperçès full of venom against Judaism…” The problem, says Brettler, is not with the tools of Historical-Criticism but with the narrative that has often been appended to that research. Such a narrative assumed either that early Israelite religion was primitive but later developed or that earlier Israelite religion was faithful and pure but that later Judaism obfuscated and corrupted it. In both cases, Christianity was seen as superior to both early and late Israelite religion.

4.2.3. Alexander Deeg’s Proposal

For Deeg, faithful Christian preaching requires a rejection of hermeneutics that dominate the Old Testament by co-opting it as a christological text for the individual or by dismissing the Old Testament as a historically distant text for another community.63

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63 Die Frage für eine gegenwärtige christliche Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments und für den praktischen Umgang mit diesem Teil des Kanons in den Kirchen muss daher lauten,
Instead, Deeg proposes that we think of the canon as a “shelter room” (Schutzraum) for plurality and lively production of many theological perspectives. It is through this lens, Deeg believes, that Jews and Christians will find a promising opening for dialogue. Compared with Walter Bruegemann’s approach, Deeg would agree that scripture (not just the Old Testament) contains multiple views or testimonies. Unlike Brueggemann, however, Deeg does not propose that there is a core testimony that all other testimonies affirm, amend, or question. Rather, for Deeg what is “core” to scripture is the ongoing, unresolved conversation about God and God’s work in the world.

This dialogue is rooted in the recognition that it is the holy and transcendent God who speaks in and through scripture. As Deeg explains, “Because God is the one who speaks the bible it remains a foreign word—beneficially foreign (heilsam fremd).” No matter if the text is written in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, whether or not it is marked with red letters or “thus says the Lord,” though it may come from David, Paul, a deuteronomistic redactor, or an apostolic disciple—all of scripture leads the reader to

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64 Deeg, “Faktische Kanonen und der Kanon der Kirche” 271. “Schutzraum” is Deeg’s contribution to German construals of the Old Testament. As such, it expands upon Frank Crüsemann’s assertion that the Old Testament is the “Wahrheitsraum” (truth room) of the New Testament and Jürgen Ebach’s position that the Old Testament is the “Klangraum” (sound room) of Christian worship. c.f. Frank Crüsemann, Das Alte Testament all Wahrheitsraum des Neuen: Die neue Sicht der christlichen Bibel (Český Těšín, Czech Republic: Gütersloh, 2015) and Jürgen Ebach, Das Alte Testament als Klangraum des evangelischen Gottesdienstes (Pößneck, Germany: Gütersloh, 2016).

65 Deeg, “Faktische Kanonen und der Kanon der Kirche” 271.

66 I am grateful to Katrina Schaafsma, a Th.D. candidate at Duke University, for helping me to see this point more clearly.

67 Deeg, “Faktische Kanonen und der Kanon der Kirche” 275.
encounter God as the wholly other. The act of reading scripture, then, is the work to
“discover its beauty and strangeness.” And, the act of preaching becomes an articulation
of the holy and beautiful otherness of God.

Such work requires the Christian interpreter to grapple with her or his standing in
relation to the text. As Deeg explains:

As soon as we, as Christians, tell our story with God, we are dependent on
narrating ourselves within the history of Israel and knowing that this is also our
history—and at the same time it remains a foreign history and a counterpart. This
means, however, that we can not be Christians without referring to Judaism. And
from this, however difficult theologically that may be, the Jewish "no" to Jesus as
the Christ is a constant part of Christian identity which is in tension with the
Christian “yes.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right when he wrote in his ethics: "The
Jew keeps the question of Christ open." This is exhausting—and at the same time
promising, because we do not come to an end with the question of who Christ is
and what he means, but are always compelled to seek and to question anew.

Deeg identifies the Christian interpreter as one who is not Israel (and not a Jew) and yet
inextricably connected to Judaism and dependent upon the scriptures of Israel to
understand her or his own identity and scripture. Thus, the Christian is one who is both an

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68 “...zu entdecken und so dessen Schönheit und Fremdheit wahrzunehmen,” Deeg,
Predigt und Derascha 349, emphasis added.
69 “Sobald wir als Christenmenschen 'unsere' Geschichte mit Gott erzählen, sind wir
darauf angewiesen, uns in die Geschichte Israels hinein zu erzählen und zu wissen: Das
ist auch unsere Geschichte – und bleibt zugleich eine fremde Geschichte und ein
Gegenüber. Das heißt aber: Wir können nicht Christen sein, ohne auf das Judentum
bezogen zu bleiben. Und daraus folgt, so schwierig und theologisch mühsam das auch
sein mag: Auch das jüdische „Nein“ zu Jesus als dem Christus ist ein beständiger Teil
christlicher Identität, der mit dem christlichen „Ja“ in Spannung steht. Dietrich
Bonhoeffer hatte schon Recht als er in seiner Ethik schrieb: „Der Jude hält die
Christusfrage offen.“ Das ist anstrengend – und zugleich verheißungsvoll, weil wir damit
auch mit der Frage, wer Christus ist und was er bedeutet, nie zu Ende kommen, sondern
immer genötigt sind, neu zu suchen und zu fragen. Christliche Identität bleibt vor jedem
Imperialismus des ‘Habens’ bewahrt und gerade so auf das lebendige Judentum bezogen,
das weit mehr als nur „religionsgeschichtliche Voraussetzung“ ist.” (Deeg, “Die zwei-
eine Bibel, der Dialog der Testamente und die offene christliche Identität”).

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outsider and an insider. Reading the Old Testament necessarily points to “the
permanently chosen people of God, Israel, which we are not, but to which we are
indissolubly related by the Christ event.” Such a position, says Deeg, requires the
Christian interpreter “to listen to Jewish interpretation in the past and present.”

Thus, by calling for the Old Testament to be a regular and prominent element of
Christian preaching, by recognizing that the Old Testament is both unifying and dividing
when it comes to Jewish-Christian relations, by inviting Christian interpreters to think of
the Old Testament as beneficially foreign, and by interpreting the Old Testament as a
shelter room for variegated theological perspectives and debate, Alexander Deeg not only
creates space for Jewish-Christian dialogue—he offers parameters for fruitful
hermeneutic and homiletic conversation.

4.3. Learning from Jewish Interpretation
Having established parameters for Jewish-Christian dialogue, Deeg proposes
several areas of conversation and learning. For instance, he suggests that Christian
pastors and Jewish rabbis might engage in fruitful conversations around topics such as
Identity, Cultural Memory, Authority and Restriction, Searching for the Word beyond
Words, and Speaking the Word that Leads to Action. While such conversations might

70 Die Texte des Alten Testaments weisen uns vielmehr an die Seite des bleibend
erwählten Gottesvolkes Israel, das wir nicht sind, aber zu dem wir durch das
Christusereignis unauflöslich in Beziehung stehen (Die Kirche und das AT 11, emphasis
added).
71 Daraus ergibt sich dann selbstverständlich auch die Notwendigkeit, auf jüdische
Auslegung in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart zu hören (Die Kirche und das AT 11).
72 See Alexander Deeg, “Word Workers: The Rabbinate and the Protestant Pastoral
Office in Dialogue” pp 303—326 in Rabbi - Pastor - Priest: Their Roles and Profiles
Through the Ages. Studia Judaica 64. Edited by Walter Homolka and Heinz-Günther
prove helpful for Christian pastors, and perhaps even for Jewish rabbis, they largely remain proposals. They are not nearly as developed as two other conversations Deeg explores in his writing. Namely, Deeg asserts that Christian preachers should be in dialogue with Jews about hermeneutics and messianic conceptions.

4.3.1. **Imagination and Meticulousness**

First, Deeg highlights Jewish interpretive approaches as an important corrective and resource for Christian interpretation—especially for interpretation of the Old Testament. In his book *Predigt und Derascha* and in an English language article that summarizes his work, Deeg proposes that Christians would benefit from the content and method of Jewish interpretation as seen in Halakhah and Haggadah. Halakhah, Deeg observes, is too often stereotyped by Christians as a collection of Jewish-rules. While it includes teaching, it is also a narrative; it “is full of imagination—yet at the same time is strictly meticulous.” So too, the Haggadah though it “encompasses ‘stories, saying, legends, anecdotes, fables, parables, miracle and wisdom stories, jokes, riddles, and much more,’” also offers very detailed observations about scripture. Taken together Halakhah and Haggadah present a hermeneutic that Deeg refers to as imagination (*Phantasie*) and meticulousness (*Akribe*).

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75 “Imagination and Meticulousness” 144.
77 “Imagination and Meticulousness” 139.
Deeg characterizes this approach as something that Christian preachers would do well to learn from the rabbis. This meticulous and imaginative approach is marked, first, by “an expectant adherence to the word.” Preaching requires a close reading of the text. To illustrate this approach, Deeg turns to the story of Jacob’s ladder (Gen 28:10-19). He notes that a classic biblical studies approach to the text might focus on what is happening behind the text. For instance, Gerhard Von Rad asserts that Genesis 28 offers a story explaining Bethel as a cultural center. Rabbinical scholars, however, “read it differently, not asking what the text originally meant or means overall, but making discoveries in the text.” As they meticulously pour over the words of scripture, rabbis observe that the text says angels were “ascending and descending” (Gen 28:12). Grounded in this observation of a subtle, unexpected, inversion of word order, rabbis then offer an imaginative interpretation: angels were with Jacob before his vision at Bethel. This reading demonstrates a hermeneutic wherein every word, every letter—indeed every gap—contains within it potential insight into the way God works in the text and in the world today.

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78 “Imagination and Meticulousness” 145. “It would help us on if we let ourselves be infected by the rabbinical readers’ meticulousness, so that the text is not merely a springboard from which we can quickly reach our own conclusions, but instead is seen as a place in which there is something to be discovered” (147).
79 “Imagination and Meticulousness” 144.
80 Ibid. 144.
81 Ibid. 145.
82 Deeg asserts “one must move closer to the text, pay attention to unevenness, not resolve tensions too quickly, and discover with pleasure the gaps. For this is how meticulousness turns out to be the essential condition for imagination” (147).
Second, Deeg asserts that imagination and meticulousness in the Halakhah and Haggadah can inspire preachers “To trust the illustrations and concrete expressions [of the text] and to discover this imagination as a remedy against the burden of concepts and abstract deductions.” Consider how Talmudic scholars imaginatively engage the difficulties of interpreting Isaiah 49:3 (“You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified”): One interpreter observes the call-and-response nature of the chapter and asserts that Isa 49:3 is part of a litany between Israel and the holy spirit wherein the spirit’s response mirrors Israel’s praise. So, Israel proclaims that God is the glory of their strength (Ps 89:18) and the spirit says God is glorified in Israel (Isa 49:3). Another interpreter, uses the lack of specificity about who is speaking in the text as an opportunity to imagine Isa 49:3 on the lips of human beings who—observing another read scripture, study Mishnah, minister to the needy, deal honestly, and speak gently—pronounce that this one is “servant Israel,” glorifying God. A third interpreter reflects on Isa 49 as prayer and asserts that verse 3 is an assurance from God that God receives the prayers of the people as a crown of glory. A fourth interpreter argues that Torah, the central text of Judaism, is the servant that glorifies God. In every case, the difficulties of the text are treated not as problems to be resolved historically, exegetically, or doctrinally. Rather, these difficulties are opportunities to imagine who might be speaking, to whom, in what

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83 “Imagination and Meticulousness” 147.
85 Ibid. 434:306.
86 Ibid. 530:228.
87 Ibid. 653:151.
context, and for what purpose. Here preachers could learn from rabbis to allow the imagery, metaphors, and form of the text to shape the creative space of the sermon with playful and interactive possibility.  

Third, imagination and meticulousness are about more than making meaning out of a text. Halakhic and Haggadic interpretation demonstrates a commitment to bringing “ethics and aesthetics into a provocative interplay.” For instance, in another interpretation of the story of Jacob’s ladder, rabbis note that Jacob takes stones for his pillow (Gen 28:11) but later sets up “the stone” under his head as a monument (Gen 28:18). Here, in an imaginative interpretation imbued with eschatological harmony, rabbis assert that the stones argued about who would support Jacob’s head until they coalesced and became one. This interpretation is about something more than making sense of the passage. It makes a theological claim about how God’s presence affects divisiveness then, now, and in the eschatological future. Preachers who learn from this kind of interpretation seek to engage the imagination and shape the character of a particular context today.

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88 As Deeg explains, “the rabbinical narratives and illustrations stay open—exactly because they stimulate the hearer’s own imagination, and nonetheless cause him or her to reflect. The individual hearer is challenged to continue the metaphor, to interpret it, and to let it affect his or her everyday life” (148).
89 “Imagination and Meticulousness” 149.
90 Ibid. 145.
91 “To do this, it will certainly be necessary to leave outdated schemata behind us once and for all. So-called Jewish legalism, Jewish works-righteousness: notions like these obstruct our view of the Halakhah’s imaginativeness—the imaginativeness of a spirituality that does not only relate to individual inwardness but also to the shaping of one’s life in the context of faith. It is a spirituality that explores the ‘realm of possibility’ and keeps ‘the desire for a better life’ going” (151).
Finally, Deeg’s understanding of imagination and meticulousness insists that one not seek to solve the text once for all. As demonstrated in the examples above, Talmudic interpretation focuses on “irregularities and difficulties in the text, creates free space for imagination, and effectively opens the playing field for a free narrative.”\(^\text{92}\) This hermeneutic is committed to wrestling with the difficulties of the text in a way that responds to clues within the text, engages theological and liturgical convictions, and yet remains imaginative and open-ended. As Deeg observes: “Important, then, for the rabbis is the fact that there is not one correct solution to the set of problems discovered in the meticulous reading. On the contrary: the scripture becomes all the richer, lovelier and larger when haggadic interpretations are discovered.”\(^\text{93}\) Indeed, this is the kind of approach that seems to delight in the discoveries that happen when interpreters experience an interruption of their own thought that leads to conversation and debate.

### 4.3.2. Messianic Interruption

Such is Deeg’s hope for Christian preachers, especially when it comes to the subject of the messiah. It is not just that preachers should acknowledge that without the Old Testament there can be no language for or understanding of christology—although Deeg certainly agrees with this point.\(^\text{94}\) Neither is it simply that Christian preachers need to better understand and articulate the saving acts of God narrated between creation and the coming of Jesus as messiah. Though, again, Deeg thinks this is important for

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\(^\text{92}\) “Imagination and Meticulousness” 145.

\(^\text{93}\) Ibid. 145.

preachers.\textsuperscript{95} Deeg’s primary interest, however, is with the interruption and creative dialogical opportunities that come when preachers take seriously the Jewish “no” to Christian claims about the messiah.

It is important to note that the interruption of the Jewish “no” is more than an intellectual or rhetorical exercise. For Deeg, Christ permanently unites Christians with Jews. Deeg even writes about the twenty-four elders in Revelation 4 as John’s eschatological vision of the twelve leaders of the tribes of Israel and twelve Christian apostles worshipping God together.\textsuperscript{96} Here Deeg understands the implications of this text as something that “leads to the union of the testaments, into the coexistence of Christianity and Judaism, and shows what it means to deal with the Old Testament in a self-assured and Israel-sensitive way, and thus in the sonic space of the two testaments and the one history of God with his world.”\textsuperscript{97} Furthermore, since Christians are united

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{95} Alexander Deeg and Manuel Goldman, “Gottes Gesalbte: Priester—Könige—Propheten: Soll’s Christus neu gelesen” in Predigtmeditationen im christlich-jüdischen Kontext, ed., Alexander Deeg et. al. (Wernsbach: Studium in Israel, 2016): Here Deeg and Goldman note how common it is for preachers to jump from Gen 3 to the Gospels (not unlike the Apostle’s creed) as if the story-line of God’s on-going salvific work in the Old Testament does not exist. Instead of taking this approach, they argue, “Jesus, der Christus, aber gehört hinein in eine Geschichte, die wieder und wieder zu erzählen ist.” “Gottes Gesalbte” = “Jesus, the Christ, is part of a story that has to be told again and again” (ii).
\textsuperscript{97}“Der gefeierte Gottesdienst führt in die Verbindung der Testamente, in das Miteinander von Christentum und Judentum und zeigt, was es heißen kann, selbstverständlich und
with Jews, Christians are bound to wrestle with the way we think and speak about Jesus Christ in light of Judaism. The interconnection of Jewish presence and Christian identity “challenges us to constantly rediscover and say what [Christ] means for us, our confession and faith, our life and our actions.”\(^9^8\)

This endeavor can interrupt Christian theological complacency and provide ample opportunity for probing introspection. For example, Deeg argues that taking seriously the Jewish “no” to Christ as messiah leads to a broader reconsideration of realized eschatology. The question here is not simply whether or not God has accomplished everything in Christ already. Rather, the question is how does realized eschatology affect Jewish-Christian relations. Deeg’s assessment agrees with Rosemary Radford-Reuther, who argues that realized eschatology creates a dualism between new messianic people and old Jewish people.\(^9^9\) This dualism is not only problematic conceptually—it also creates Christian arrogance, which feeds the roots of anti-judaism.\(^1^0^0\) Thus, the scriptural and eschatological interconnection of Jews and Christians becomes a central discerning factor for understanding, articulating, and evaluating Christian identity and theology.

This approach, however, is not limited to an apophatic heuristic. An awareness of Jewish presence offers more to Christian theology and proclamation than negation. As

\(^{9^8}\) “Die Dynamik des Christus Jesus selbst, der uns bleibend mit Jüdinnen und Juden verbindet, fordert dazu heraus, beständig neu zu entdecken und zu sagen, was er für uns, unser Bekennen und Glauben, unser Leben und Handeln bedeutet” (“Gottes Gesalbte” ii).

\(^{9^9}\) “Messianisch predigen” lx.

\(^{1^0^0}\) Ibid. lx.
Deeg explains with regard to christology, “The Jewish ‘no’ to the Christian Messiah confession leads to the surplus of the [messianic] promise and thus becomes the basis for a renewed hope and work for this world, connecting Jews and Christians.”[101] So what is this surplus? Deeg suggests that it is the awareness that the messiah is not simply a figure who came once and will return at the end of time. Rather, the messiah is always coming, appearing, and intervening.[102] This message may sound like one of the central hopes of Advent, but it also reflects the experience of Rabbi Joshua in Sanhedrin 98a, who is surprised to find the messiah sitting amidst the poor and sick at the gates of Rome. The state of the world—caught in a succession of oppressive empires, exploitative economies, and neglect of the other—desperately needs the on-going intervention of the messiah in the world.[103] Such a world also needs a people (or peoples) committed to “staying on the way of searching” for and joining with God’s interruptive presence in the world.[104]

Therefore, Deeg does not assert that Christians should avoid messianic preaching out of a consideration for Jews. Neither should Christian preachers limit messianic proclamation to texts taken from the Gospel. For Deeg, “messianic” is not another

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[102] Deeg agrees with Jewish philosopher, Jeschajahu Leibowitz that the messiah is always coming (“Messianisch Predigen” lx).

[103] Citing Sanhedrin 98a, Deeg argues that Christians would do better to recognize the messiah not as the initiator of a realized new age but as the interruption (“Unterbrechung”) of time (“Messianisch predigen” lx).

adjective for preaching like “personal,” “rhetorical” or “dramaturgical.” Rather, messianic preaching is Christian preaching, and Christian preaching is messianic preaching.\(^\text{105}\)

However, consideration of Jewish presence and partnership leads the Christian preacher to engage messianic proclamation in ways that are different from traditional practices. Deeg offers several suggestions for what this might look like. First, messianic preaching does not require one to claim Christ as the messiah.\(^\text{106}\) Stated negatively, the name “Jesus” and the title “Christ” are not magical words that transform a sermon into a Christian sermon. Stated positively, messianic preaching is a movement (Bewegung) more than a statement (Behauptung).\(^\text{107}\) As Deeg understands it, such preaching seeks to

\(^{105}\) “Messianisch predigen” lxvi. See also, Deeg, “Auch für dich”: “Christian preaching is messianic preaching, and messianic preaching is the preaching of an expectant today, which (somewhat pathetically formulated) breaks the chains of chronos and stretches out longingly to the kairos. It is a sermon that knows itself to be in the way of fellowship with Jews - towards perfection. It takes the world exactly and discovers in it the traces of the new world of God. And she knows at the same time that she must not transfigure the world, since she remains open to God's new action and fulfillment. It is the sermon of a messianic today that is salvation for you” (“Christliche Predigt ist messianische Predigt— und messianische Predigt ist die Predigt eines erwartungsvollen Heute, das (etwas pathetisch formuliert) die Ketten des Chronos zerbricht und sich voller Sehnsucht dem Kairos entgegenstreckt. Sie ist Predigt, die sich in der Weggemeinschaft mit Jüdinnen und Juden weiß—der Vollendung entgegen. Sie nimmt die Welt genau wahr—and entdeckt in ihr die Spuren der neuen Welt Gottes. Und sie weiß zugleich, dass sie die Welt nicht verklären darf, da sie offen bleibt für Gottes neues Handeln und seine Vollendung. Sie ist so die Predigt eines messianischen Heute, das für dich zum Heil geschieht”) “Auch für dich” 15.

\(^{106}\) “Messianisch predigen” lxvi.

\(^{107}\) “Messianisch predigen” lxvi.
move away from focus upon the preacher and toward “the expected and the longed for” so that Christ may redisplay Christ’s self and speak “today.”

Second, this kind of messianic preaching interrupts the linearity of time. Deeg calls it a time-announcement (Zeit-Ansage) of God’s time that interrupts one’s own time-experience (Zeit-Erfahrung). Think of Jesus’ preaching in Luke 4:21 where he says that Isaiah 61 is fulfilled “today… in your hearing.” This kind of preaching interrupts the irrefutable past (die unwiederbringliche Vergangenheit) and the uncertain future (ungewisse Zukunft), proclaiming a message that constantly escapes the present (die Gegenwart beständig entflieht). Preaching in this mode, says Deeg, is preaching that disrupts and disturbs time—a proclamation that is already changing the world.

Third, messianic preaching that considers Jewish presence and partnership is political. It recognizes that the sermon is preached in the midst of the world and history (eine Predigt mitten in der Welt und der Geschichte). On the one hand, what Deeg proposes sounds significantly different from Karl Barth’s dictum that the place for

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109 “Messianisch predigen” lxvi.
110 “This Messianic Today interrupts any linear perception of time, retrieves the prophetic text from its past and makes it present to the mouth of Jesus and thus open to the future for the readers of the Gospel of Luke” (“Dieses messianische Heute unterbricht jede lineare Zeitwahrnehmung, holt den prophetischen Text aus seiner Vergangenheit und macht ihn Munde Jesu gegenwärtig und so für die Leserinnen und Leser des Lukasevangeliums offen für die Zukunft”) (Deeg, “Auch für dich” 8).
111 “Messianisch predigen” lxvi.
112 Ibid. lxiii.
113 Ibid. lxvii.
preaching is between baptism and communion. Deeg even argues for the rediscovery of the political sermon (die Wiederentdeckung politischer Predigt). On the other hand, Deeg’s approach resonates with many aspects of Barth’s preaching that Angela Dienhart Hancock uncovers in Karl Barth’s Emergency Homiletic—though Deeg is decidedly more open than Barth in his stance toward and advocacy for Jews. Deeg speaks of messianic preaching as that which shapes a messianic community, creating a “we” that can act. This community is constituted by the Jewish body of Christ (Christusleib). The church is bound with Jews and Judaism, standing together “in this world as messianic witnesses, sharing work and related to each other.” The kind of witnessing that messianic preaching proclaims is not reducible to a human progress project

115 “Messianisch predigen” lxvii.
116 As Hancock describes it, Barth’s homiletic asserts: (1) The proper context for preaching is the space bounded by baptism, Lord’s Supper and Scripture—not state and blood (257). (2) Preaching is not the act of offering a relevant word to the people, but witnessing after the witness of the prophets and apostles (235). (3) The Bible broadens our focus beyond Volk and nation (235). (4) The selection of a text is not to be based on a relevant theme or preconceived persuasive purpose. Rather, “the selection of a text happens in the church, and as such it is subordinated to the ‘law’ of the church” (264). (5) The preacher does not preach history. Neither is the historical meaning the meaning of the text. (274). (6) Barth counsels the preacher to let the sermon live. Don’t confine gospel to an ideological template. Don’t talk about every current event. (321-2). (7) The preacher would do well to live into the virtues and charisms required for his or her calling: humility, openness, diligence, prayerful expectancy, discipline, flexibility, love, and hope (325). Angela Dienhart Hancock, Karl Barth’s Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).
117 “Messianisch predigen” lxvii.
118 “Messianic preaching can not refrain from the corporeality of Messiah” (“Messianische Predigt kann nicht von der Leiblichkeit des Messias absehen”)
119 “Messianisch predigen” lxviii.
but rather seeks to point to and join with the God who wants to liberate (befreien will). In these ways, Deeg argues, the church is better understood as an exodus community (Exodusgemeinde). Messianic preaching, then, lifts up this witnessing community as an alternative to the world and its history, articulating the present and future of God’s coming liberative acts.

3.3. Messianic Liturgy and Jewish Presence

The three major points discussed above lead Deeg to assert a final point: messianic preaching calls for messianic liturgy. As Deeg observes: “The sermon is a language effort that, thank God, is not alone. It is surrounded by song and prayer, the table of the word and the table of the meal, praise and lamentation, Kyrie, glory and blessing.” While a study of liturgy is beyond the purview of this chapter, and while Deeg writes more on the topic than can be covered here, it is important to observe a few of Deeg’s key claims about liturgy that impact preaching directly. First, Deeg observes that many liturgical acts not only can (or should), but often do weave together Old Testament and New Testament—past, present, and future—into proclamations of messianic promise and hope. To offer just one example, consider the Sanctus, which is

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120 “Messianisch predigen” lxiii.
121 Ibid. lxv.
122 Ibid. lxv. Here Deeg agrees with Jurgen Moltmann assertion.
123 Ibid. lxviii.
124 Ibid. lxvii.
126 At the same time, Deeg acknowledges elsewhere that Christian liturgy is far too anti-Jewish, especially in its false contrasts between Old Testament and New Testament, Israel-forgetting interpretations, theological and historical distortions, and terminological imperialism (Deeg, “Neue Worte in einer alten Beziehung: Liturgische Sprachfindung im
performed in the present moment of worship and yet combines texts recalling past events in Isaiah 6 and Matthew 21 as a key to an eschatological future. Deeg observes, the Old Testament parts of this liturgical text speak of the lordship of God coming to and from Zion while the New Testament parts are located during the triumphal entry of Jesus.\textsuperscript{127}

Second, for Deeg, recognizing and reflecting upon the similarities and differences of the texts that contribute to the sanctus is one way to enrich Jewish and Christian understandings of messiah. For instance, Deeg posits, one eschatological expectation could open up possibilities in the other; or conversely, the conflict between the two might draw out necessary distinctions.\textsuperscript{128} Such reflections would also help Christians to recognize that we are distinct but not separate from Jews.\textsuperscript{129} Indeed, the sanctus presents a space where two texts and two traditions live together. For these reasons alone Deeg asserts that reflection on the celebration of Christian worship “could and should become the phenomenological starting-point of a Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament.”\textsuperscript{130}

To this end, Deeg offers a third proposal: Christians should enter into a period of liturgical play as a means of discovering and developing deeper Jewish-Christian

\begin{footnotes}
\item[128] Ibid. 40.
\item[129] Ibid. 40.
\item[130] “Viel mehr als abstrakte religionsgeschichtliche oder dogmatische Modelle könnte und müsste der gefeierte Gottesdienst so zum phänomenologischen Ausgangspunkt einer christlichen Hermeneutik des Alten Testaments werden” (12).
\end{footnotes}
connections. “If I am to imagine a process of liturgical re-working on the ‘Agende’ [worship book], this means first of all that we need celebration rooms and experimental rooms for the ‘totally normal’ worship [services], so that people have new experiences in it and with it.”

Part of this play and experimentation might include learning to read the Old Testament and New Testament synchronically, seeking new perceptions of Christian existence in light of post-Shoah understandings of Judaism, and finding new ways of approaching Jewish-Christian tensions. Deeg also encourages congregations to orchestrate both textual and embodied encounters between Jews and Christians. The latter might be more difficult to organize, but it potentially holds greater impact. Still, Deeg holds it is possible to stay open to Israel’s presence in every Christian service, even without an embodied Jewish presence in Christian worship.

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132 Rather than reading in the diachronic ways of the past that have led to anti-Jewish interpretations, Deeg calls for Christians to recognize that Christian worship is in the Jewish genome (“Gottesdienst in Israels Gegenwart” 40). At the same time, Deeg is clear in his rejection of synchronic reductions that replace “Israel” with “Church” (44).

133 Deeg asserts that a new view of Israel in the Protestant church should lead to new theories of worship (“Gottesdienst in Israels Gegenwart” 42).

134 Deeg is optimistic about liturgy as a conduit for this work because he shares Martin Nicol’s view that liturgy is a way into mystery (“Gottesdienst in Israels Gegenwart” 42). And, the proper discernment of truth amidst the differences between Jews and Christians is a mystery that rests with God (42). At best, human beings can attempt to approach it by paying attention the the dynamic interactions of Jewish and Christian texts without resorting to simplistic and reductionistic solutions (44).

135 “Gottesdienst in Israels Gegenwart” 50.

136 Ibid. 50.
Deeg this requires reading the Old Testament in every service. It should not simply be worked in somewhere, but the connotations of the Old Testament text should be listened to closely—especially those that may be a disturbance to traditional Christian theology.\textsuperscript{137}

Taken together, Deeg’s reflections on liturgy, messianic theology, and talmudic interpretation demonstrate that Jewish-Christian dialogue can produce numerous constructive insights for Christian interpretation and theological articulation of scripture. By encouraging the reading of scripture after the manner of talmudic interpreters, Deeg does not recommend simply that Christians read the Talmud or include facile repetitions of its insights and reflections.\textsuperscript{138} Rather, Deeg is interested in the detailed observations and imaginative interpretations that can arise when one engages in dialogue about the text. By calling Christians to listen to and for the Jewish “no” to their claims about messiah, Deeg uncovers numerous creative and constructive possibilities for the future of Christian thought and practice. One constructive possibility, seen briefly, involves playful experimentation with elements of Christian worship that are made open to Israel’s presence. Not surprisingly, Deeg’s reflections on hermeneutics, theology, and liturgy directly inform his approach to preaching.

4.4. Dialogical Preaching

Deeg’s preaching brings together his commitments to textually focused, liturgically situated, messianic hermeneutics that are consistently aware of Jewish

\textsuperscript{137} “Gottesdienst in Israels Gegenwart” 51-2.

\textsuperscript{138} I am indebted here to Katrina Schaafsma who argues in an unpublished paper from 2017, “Imaginative Meticulousness in Genesis Rabbah’s Casting of Cain,” that rabbinic scholars in the Talmud do not always interpret scripture the way that Deeg recommends to his readers. At times they attempt to solve the text or they read far beyond the language and meaning of the text.
presence. He labels his homiletic approach, dialogical preaching. By this Deeg intends quite specific approaches to understandings of both “preaching” and “dialogue.” These require examination in more depth in order to fully appreciate the approach of his preaching.

4.4.1. Preaching as Disruption

One of the clearest articulations of Deeg’s approach to preaching comes from his 2011 lecture in Copenhagen.\(^{139}\) Here Deeg frames preaching as disruption, initiation, and staging. First, preaching is disruption, or at least it should be. Deeg laments that “Sermons are scarcely heard as disruptions.”\(^{140}\) While he does not specify exactly what he thinks should be disrupted, Deeg does express an interest in examining homiletic convention and the norming of a particular congregation’s experience. Deeg says that he sees too much “convention” in preaching.\(^{141}\) Too many sermons present a stale rehashing of interpretations, theologies, and sermonic forms that are long past the acme of their heyday. Such sermons risk boring their audience. These conventional sermons also run the risk of norming and universalizing the congregation’s experience such that “Church” means “my church” and “faith” refers to the way “I” understand and practice religion.

For Deeg, these undisrupted conventional approaches often explicitly and implicitly devalue ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.


\(^{140}\) Ibid. 2011.

\(^{141}\) Ibid. 2011.
To correct these errors and to empower congregations to engage with those who are different than they are, Deeg commends regular engagement with “the other” in preaching. Following German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels, Deeg takes for granted that “there is something alien, not just something not yet understood but, as Waldenfels formulates it, ‘something radically alien…that does not arise from any simple deficiency of comprehension and understanding but belongs in its inaccessibility to the subject and consequently also to the discourse itself.’”\textsuperscript{142} Deeg is most drawn to Waldenfels’ concept of alien as \textit{externum}—something external standing in contrast to something internal.\textsuperscript{143} In this way, “alien” is not only different but abidingly foreign. As Deeg explains, “The radicalism of what is alien does not imply that the alien is totally different from what is one’s own and familiar, but it certainly implies that it is neither derived from what is particularly one’s own nor can it be subsumed under general [knowledge].”\textsuperscript{144}

In many ways Deeg’s perspective here is related to his understanding of scripture as beneficially foreign. In both cases, Deeg believes that God can and does work through that which is alien. Deeg’s assessment of the Old Testament as alien helps to articulate Christian ontology vis à vis Israel’s status as the chosen people of God. Christians are not


\textsuperscript{143} Waldenfels also notes that “alien” can imply alienum, something that belongs to others; or insolitum, something of a different kind that is exotic, sinister and strange (Deeg, “Disruption, Initiation, and Staging” 2011, citing Waldenfels Grundmotive 111).

\textsuperscript{144} “Disruption, Initiation, and Staging” 2011: “Radikalität des Fremden besagt nicht, daß Fremdes ganz anders ist als das Eigene und Vertraute, es besagt aber sehr wohl, daß es weder aus Eigenem hergeleitet noch ins Allgemeine aufgehoben werden kann.”
Israel—not part of the chosen people—and yet, through Christ, mysteriously made a part of the people of God. Deeg’s homiletic use of the alien is a strategy for disruption of Christian convention and assumption that is meant to lead hearers into a reflection upon Christian (or even congregational) ontology.

To accomplish this disruptive homiletic, Deeg again follows Waldenfels, asking: “How can we enter into something which is alien without neutralizing or denying its challenges and demands by the way we deal with its effects?”145 For both scholars the answer is to use quotation. “The quotation lies ‘on the threshold between what is one’s own and what is alien.’”146 Deeg’s goal here is to allow the voices of others to ring loudly and clearly within the sermon. While recognizing that it is the preacher—and not the quoted source—who composes and delivers the sermon, Deeg nevertheless believes that it is possible to preach in a way that fosters a polyphony, allowing for voices other than the preacher’s to be heard within the body of the sermon. Deeg agrees with Waldenfels that “One who quotes is not per se the lord or lady of what is said or written.”147 More than that, however, Deeg trusts that the preacher can include quotations in a way that presents neither a debate with a straw man nor a range of opinion leading to a simple synthesis.

Unfortunately, Deeg offers very little instruction on how one might employ this homiletic strategy. Perhaps Deeg assumes that his audience is as gifted a rhetorician as

147 Ibid. 2011.
he, or maybe he trusts that they are well-versed in Bakhtinian dialogical studies.\textsuperscript{148} Either way, Deeg offers little more than an introduction to disruptive homiletics here. Several key questions remain unanswered. Should the preacher use longer quotes to amplify the voices of others? Or, should there be a greater frequency of quoting another perspective? Is it better to place these quotes at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the sermon? How does the genre of the sermon change the way the quote(s) is understood? How does the preacher manage the expectations of the congregation, who do not normally listen to a sermon looking for a voice that disrupts, and potentially contradicts, the perspective of the preacher? Indeed, there is much more to be explored about homiletic strategies of disruption and polyphony.

\textbf{4.4.2. Preaching as Initiation}

A second key element for understanding Deeg’s homiletic requires less discussion. This is the assertion that the sermon is a moment of initiation into the text. Deeg explains:

\begin{quote}
I describe the sermon as an introduction to the biblical word—and consider this term hermeneutically far more appropriate than if we were to talk of the sermon as an interpretation of the word. I encountered such a way of introduction in Rabbinic Judaism. There (in the first centuries CE) a form of sermon appears to have existed where the preachers held their sermon (d’rasha) before the reading of the section of the Torah intended for the Sabbath.\textsuperscript{149}
\end{quote}

Here Deeg seeks to apply to preaching the principles he discerned in his study of imaginative and meticulous hermeneutics. His primary concern is with the loss of the text

\textsuperscript{148} It may be the case that Deeg assumes his audience knows Bakhtin well. This lecture was given at the University of Copenhagen to students studying under Marlene Lorensen. Lorensen wrote her dissertation on Bakhtin as a guide for preaching as carnivalesque dialogue.

\textsuperscript{149} Deeg, “Disruption, Initiation, and Staging” 2011.
in contemporary preaching. Though he does not advocate a rejection of historical
criticism, Deeg is aware that historical-criticism can produce a loss of the text in
preaching.\textsuperscript{150} It runs the risk of focusing unnecessarily upon the theoretical story or
community behind the text. A similar danger can occur with dogmatic preaching, which
can mask the text with projections of theological interpretation.\textsuperscript{151} A third risk is to focus
too much on associative connections, claiming that this text is just like one’s own
experience.\textsuperscript{152}

Instead, Deeg proposes that both the content and form of preaching should serve
to open up scripture.\textsuperscript{153} Deeg preaches with the assumption that the Spirit is encountered
in, with, and under the letters of scripture.\textsuperscript{154} He encourages preachers to follow rabbinic
models that demonstrate “an unconditional adherence to the biblical word and a
pleasurable, yet serious, playful yet theologically significant way of dealing with it in the
context of communicative holiness.”\textsuperscript{155} In this way of preaching the text is not a
springboard for discussing some other topic or issue. Rather, it is the place where one
may encounter God. “It is the space that is multi-layered and full of suspense, explored
with philological meticulousness and creative desire—in the expectation that God himself

\textsuperscript{150} Deeg, “Skripturalität und Metaskripturalität: Über Heilige Schrift, Leselust und
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.” 8.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid. 8.
\textsuperscript{153} Deeg, “Disruption, Initiation, and Staging” 2011.
\textsuperscript{154} Deeg, “Skripturalität und Metaskripturalität” 14.
\textsuperscript{155} In German: “eine unbedingte Anhänglichkeit an das biblische Wort und ein lustvoll-
freier und doch ernsthafter, ein spielerischer und doch theologisch bedeutsamer Umgang
mit ihm im Kontext kommunikatorischer Heiligkeit” (“Skripturalität und
Metaskripturalität” 15).
will speak.” Deeg proposes that the kind of preaching that introduces, opens up, and leads others into scripture is a sort of testimony or witness to what the preacher encounters of God in the text. Here is where preaching as disruption can again prove helpful. The expectation is that this kind of preaching will inspire and invite other testimonies from the congregation in response to what they heard and saw of God. These witnesses may or may not agree or with the sermon. They may not even respond to the preached sermon at all. The goal is to foster a present-day encounter with God in, with, and through the words of scripture.

4.4.3. Preaching as Staging

This interplay is of great significance for Deeg’s homiletic. In fact, it leads Deeg to propose that preaching should not be considered to be mere testimony, but rather a witness that stages further dialogue and debate. Preaching as staging understands “meaning” not as “that which is mediated beyond the concrete linguistic structures of a text and then can be ‘taken’ and distributed, but as the occurrence which, in the interplay with the biblical text and one’s own words, happens ever (and diversely) new.” The point is not for the preacher to tell the congregation what they need to know or how they should think or act. Rather, the point is to foster conversations (in one’s mind and among the congregation) about what God is up to in the text and in the world. Consider Deeg’s reflection on his own preaching:

156 “Skripturalität und Metaskripturalität” 16.
I dissociate myself from desiring to know precisely what ‘my’ audience needs today and what I can dispense to them from the rich treasury of my knowledge or experience. I dissociate myself from distributing the ‘message of the Gospel’ (which I apparently ‘have’!), passing it on or breaking it down as fittingly as possible. In other words I put an end to that well-used form of massively treating our audiences as children which is the result of a downward slope between me and them. I remain modest and settle with the hearers in the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible, take with us our world and what we meet in it, raise questions, make observations. And then let myself be surprised by what the listeners (after the sermon) tell me they have experienced.160

Preaching for Deeg, then, is a staging of a greater conversation about God in scripture and the world. It requires that the preacher and the congregation be initiated into the text. It allows for polyphony, disagreement, and even disruption. And, it invites the testimony and proclamation of others as an ongoing conversation with the hope that in the midst of dialogue we will encounter the voice and presence of God.161

4.4.4. Dialogical Preaching

Dialogical Preaching, then, refers to more than a rhetorical strategy employed within the sermon. It speaks to the kind of preaching that fosters dialogue beyond the preaching moment. Nevertheless, such preaching needs to model dialogue and disagreement well so that listeners will be equipped not only with the words and images of the text, but with strategies for conversation that seeks God’s presence.

To this end, Deeg again turns to dialogue with Judaism about Old Testament texts. Here Deeg argues that the history of Jewish interpretation of the Torah models for

161 “What matters is the disruption which teaches a new way of perceiving, the introduction which leads us into the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible, and the staging of that intertextuality which transcends and changes our world—and which altogether make the expectation great that our verbal attempts, our stammering and stuttering, lead us to that word which God himself speaks to us—terrifying or liberating’” (“Disruption, Initiation, and Staging” 2011).
Christian preachers a different way of engaging and proclaiming the text. He observes, “If the study of the Torah is not the means to any end, but rather resembles a marriage-like love relationship for the long term, then one never will be finished with it.”

Such an approach would lead the preacher away from trying to solve the text, away from gaining mastery over it. Instead, this approach suggests that what is needed is a kind of preaching that offers more observation than pronouncement, raises more questions than objections, attends more to the voice(s) of the text and to conversations about it than to outside perspectives, and seeks to describe rather than proscribe what one observes. The preacher’s personal and congregational goals for every sermon, then, would be to foster a deeper relationship with the text and with the God who speaks in and through the text.

Here, Deeg believes that preaching from the texts that Jews and Christians hold in common could be especially fruitful. For, by preaching the Old Testament, the preacher is invited to consider the original and on-going relationships that the text assumes.

Preaching the Old Testament should lead one to recognize that “the voice of the first addressees and of the original authors…is still present in the interpretation.” Similarly, preaching the Old Testament should make clear that “interpretation is not just about texts,” but is itself relational—it necessarily leads one to connect with “people who read and interpret these texts.” Such connections to people past and present should

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challenge monologic approaches to the Old Testament, interrupt the “singularity of Christian hermeneutics,” and shelve highly problematic hermeneutics like those seen in 2 Cor 3:7-11.\(^{165}\)

To foster such Jewish-Christian connections, Deeg asserts that Christian preachers need to commit to constant conversation with Jews (and find pleasure in these conversations!). Christian preachers need to be provided with a wider range and greater quantity of Jewish interpretation. And, Christian preachers must be more open to reconsidering Christian hermeneutical assumptions about Jewish hermeneutics.\(^{166}\) In other words, Christians must listen to Jews.

Admittedly, this could prove to be a challenge. For instance, in the same lecture cited above, Deeg highlights the work of Rabbi Roland Gradwohl. In 1987, Gradwohl published Bible Designs from Jewish Sources.\(^{167}\) It was an attempt to resource Christian preaching of Old Testament texts. Thus, Gradwohl highlights Jewish interpretations including but not limited to those in the rabbinic period. For instance, in a reflection on Isaiah 52:13—53:12 (the 4th of the Servant Songs), Gradwohl draws on Jewish sources to argue that the Christian preacher should reject the theme of vicarious suffering and

\(^{165}\) “Wie Not-wendend” 2017. 2 Cor 3:7-11: “Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory; for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!”

\(^{166}\) “Wie Not-wendend” 2017.

hold off on jumping to traditional Christian soteriology too quickly or facilely. Instead, the preacher should attend to the politics of the text and emphasize it as a word of hope in the context of Israel’s suffering.¹⁶⁸ These insights, and the conversation that might follow, sound exactly like the sort of thing for which Deeg hopes. Gradwohl’s work is an important modern Jewish attempt to resource and interrupt Christian preaching of Old Testament texts. Or, as Deeg asserts, Gradwohl’s works contain constructive “disturbing potential” for Christian preaching.¹⁶⁹

Nevertheless, Deeg has concerns about the use of Jewish sources. In the case of Gradwohl’s book, it appears that few German Protestant clergy made use of it. Why this is the case remains unclear. Perhaps there were marketing, distribution, or accessibility issues with the book? Perhaps few were preaching Old Testament at the time. Or, maybe Protestant pastors simply did not know how best to engage with a resource that interrupted their own preaching assumptions about Old Testament texts? Again, the reasons remain unclear. However, as Deeg shows, even if sources like Rabbi Gradwohl are used by Christian preachers, a second challenge immediately presents itself. Deeg calls this the double danger: “the danger of uncritical idealization on the one hand and monopolizing instrumentalization on the other.”¹⁷⁰ With either case, a potential Jewish-


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Christian dialogue collapses and one is left with either a projection of one’s own ideals or a functional elimination of the otherness of the quoted source.

For these reasons Deeg suggests that Christian preachers need to develop a better model for engaging in dialogue with Jews and Jewish scholarship (or, for that matter, with any other source). Deeg envisions a conversation that follows the post-colonial, “Third Room” model of Homi K. Bhabha. As Deeg understands it, the Third Room requires that “both partners in a discussion—both coming from their own sphere—leave this behind and involve themselves anew in the encounter. This does not take place along the secure pathways and in the well-known realms of one’s own personal constructions, but rather on terrain unknown to both, in a Third Room.” While Deeg does not specify precisely the dynamics and parameters of this encounter, nor does he offer examples from his own experience, it is clear that he hopes this model will lead preachers to engage with others in dialogue that avoids both uncritical idealization and monopolizing instrumentalization. Deeg seems to envision an encounter where neither dialogue partner dominates or even seeks to persuade the other to his or her side. Rather, both dialogue

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171 Deeg writes, “the depiction of the ideal image itself threatens to become nothing other than a highly individualized projection of one’s own yearnings, conceptions, and ideas” (303-4).
172 With monopolizing instrumentation, the Jewish dialogical model is coopted as a way to affirm one’s own position (304). As such it presents no real dialogue and no interaction with living counterparts (305).
173 c.f. Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994). Also, note that the “Third Room” is the concept that Deeg uses to speak of the desired interaction between text and context in a sermon (Predigt und Derascha 368).
174 “Word Workers” 305-6.
partners enter into conversation with an openness\textsuperscript{175} to being changed by the other. For Deeg, the goal is for the conversation to have “a transforming and altering effect on what is one’s own. No one leaves the room as the same person he or she was upon entering it.”\textsuperscript{176}

4.5. Sermon Sample: “O du fröhliche…”\textsuperscript{177} While the parameters of what this might look like for a face-to-face dialogue (or even for a hypothetical dialogue in a pastor’s study) remain unclear, Deeg offers ample illustration of Third Room Dialogue in his own preaching of the Old and New Testament. In one example, taken from his 2016 Christmas Eve service, Deeg presents a Johannine gospel reading (Jn 3:16-21) in dialogue with the story of Hanukkah (c.f. 2 Mac 10:1-8).

Deeg begins his sermon by commenting on how challenging it is to sing the old hymn, “O du fröhliche.” With the tragic events in Allepo, Cairo, Nice, and Berlin, and with the rise of post-factual reality-denying (\textit{postfaktische Realitätsverweigerung}) that enabled Brexit and Donald Trump, how can Christians sing, “O, you joyful….”\textsuperscript{178} Deeg continues:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{175} Openness is a significant theme in Deeg’s Christian ontology. In an article about the canonicity of the Old Testament Deeg asserts, "Faith in Christ Jesus leads Christians to an open identity that compels them to seek, to ask, to confess new confession and at the same time to lead in modesty, patience and burning expectation.” (Deeg “Faktische Kanonen und der Kanon der Kirche” Pastoraltheologie 104 (2015): 269—284, 282).
\textsuperscript{176} Deeg “Word Workers” 306.
\textsuperscript{178} Deeg “O du fröhliche” 1. The first verse of the hymn reads: “O du fröhliche, o du selige, gnadenbringende Weihnachtszeit! Welt ging verloren, Christ ist geboren: Freue, freue dich, o Christenheit!” (O you joyful, O you blessed, grace-bringing Christmas time! The world was lost, Christ is born: Rejoice, rejoice, O Christendom!).
\end{flushright}
Oh yes - and if you're going to ask so, dear community, then you can also ask quite fundamentally: Why has not the world changed since the birth of Jesus in the stable of Bethlehem? There the angels sang in the fields over Bethlehem of "peace on earth" and the shepherds announced the good news - and then we look around and see a world that in 2016 certainly did not become more peaceful.\textsuperscript{179}

And yet, people of God are called time and again to recount, “The history of the love of God, his irrational, radical love.”\textsuperscript{180} Scriptures like John 3:16-21 and feasts like Christmas invite us to seek the light. They also remind us that God so loves the world that God interferes with (or, perhaps, disrupts) the world:

So God loved the world, that he does not leave us to ourselves in this our world. Not our political helplessness, not our post-factual confusion, not our pessimism or optimism. God interferes. Is personally present with his unconditional, his radical love. Yes, it is true: Christmas is the feast of love, the radical love of God. It [i.e. God’s love] does not stop in the face of the darkness in my life and in this world. It has known this all along.\textsuperscript{181}

At the same time, Christmas and John 3 highlight a human bent to “skotophilia,” a love of darkness in all people.\textsuperscript{182} Using himself as rhetorical example, Deeg highlights how each one of us is not who he or she wants to be in thought and in deed. Too often we

\textsuperscript{179} “Ach ja – und wenn man dabei ist, so zu fragen, liebe Gemeinde, dann kann man auch ganz grundsätzlich fragen: Warum hat sich die Welt eigentlich nicht verändert seit der Geburt Jesu im Stall von Bethlehem? Da sangen die Engel auf den Feldern über Bethlehem vom „Frieden auf Erden“ und die Hirten verkündeten die frohe Botschaft – und dann schauen wir uns um und sehen eine Welt, die 2016 bestimmt nicht friedlicher wurde” (Deeg “O du fröhliche” 1).

\textsuperscript{180} Deeg “O du fröhliche” 1.


\textsuperscript{182} Deeg “O du fröhliche” 2.
are resigned to darkness and given to melancholy. We see “this world crashing down in all its crises (instead of recognizing God’s cosmic love) and act accordingly.” What we need is to be reminded of is God’s love and light.

At this point Deeg introduces a new interlocutor to conversation between the hymn, John, and Christmas. He introduces the Jewish festival, Hanukkah:

Today, dear community, is a special Christmas Eve. It does not happen often, but this year the Jewish Hanukkah festival begins exactly with our Christmas. The festival of lights. This evening Jews light the first light of the Hanukkah candelabrum. Seven more will follow—every day one more. They recall the light that God has given anew in times of political confusion. At that time, in the first half of the second century BC, the temple in Jerusalem was plundered and desecrated by the Greek king, Antiochus IV. Pagan sacrifices were made there. It came to a Jewish uprising—and in 164 BC to victory against Antiochus IV. The temple was back in Jewish hands. The temple consecration was celebrated, but there was a problem: The consecrated oil that was found was only enough for one day. But to make new [oil], it took eight days. But the miracle happened: The candlestick did not burn one day, but eight. Reason enough, up to today on each of the eight days one lights another candle on the Hanukkah candelabrum—and remembers the miracle that God has done.  

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183 Again, Deeg uses the rhetorical, first person, to address the experience of all: “Da sehe ich diese Welt krachend untergehen in all ihren Krisen, anstatt Gottes kosmische Liebe zu erkennen und entsprechend zu handeln” (2).

I would argue that Deeg’s reference to Hanukkah here is a way of disrupting his congregation’s assumptions. Deeg draws attention to the otherness of Jewish presence, contrasting it with “our Christmas.” But it is not, “our Christmas” that receives Deeg’s attention. The story Deeg tells is not of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in the stable, but of Jews defeating Antiochus IV and reclaiming the temple. The implication is that Christians are not the only, nor even the first, to celebrate God’s gift of light. Neither are Christians the first to grapple with trying times. Jews struggled nearly 200 years before Christ with the greed and destruction of Antiochus IV.

At the same time, Deeg is careful not to allow his congregation to dismiss the otherness of Hanukkah as too foreign to be beneficial. Deeg highlights that both Christmas and Hanukkah use light to express thanksgiving and longing for God’s intervention in the world. And, in 2016, both celebrations began at the same moment. By telling the Hanukkah story and by speaking of the Jewish celebration of light on this night, Deeg indirectly invites his congregation to reflect on the real presence and practice of Jews who live in Leipzig. In 2016 there were about 1100 Jews, mostly Russian immigrants, who lived in Leipzig. They are a small, but significantly valued minority of the city’s population.

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185 While one could imagine a Christian preacher speaking about light and illustrating the point by referring to Hanukkah, or including the festival in a mash-up of “light” passages beginning with Genesis, Deeg intends for Hanukkah to interrupt the congregations expectations, as highlighted above in his lecture at the University of Copenhagen: “What matters [for preaching] is the disruption which teaches a new way of perceiving, the introduction [to scripture] which leads us into the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible, and the staging of that intertextuality which transcends and changes our world” (“Disruption, Initiation, and Staging” 2011).
These observations about Hanukkah and Christmas lead Deeg to rewrite John 3:16. The scripture itself becomes the model for the kind of transformation imagined in Third Room Dialogue:

God so loved the world that he gave a new beginning and brought back the light in politically confusing times. Ultimately, chances are bad for darkness and evil. Ultimately, it has long since been lost in the face of the love story of God.\(^{186}\)

Notice here that Deeg portrays Christmas as something different than it was before its dialogue with Hanukkah. Christmas is a part of God’s Hanukkah light intervention. Notice also that the “only begotten Son” has been disturbed from its location in the verse. Deeg is clearly seeking to complicate the congregation’s ideas of messianic fulfillment—and at Christmas no less! However, this is no scrooge-like, christological “humbug.” Rather, Deeg wants to lead the congregation to commit to join with Jews in an ongoing politically acting, messiah-awaiting movement, not beholden to a progress project but open to God’s surprising interruption of time.\(^{187}\) Deeg punctuates this point at the end of his sermon with references to the past, present and on-going work of God in the world:

God so loved the world that the angels in heaven were singing about peace on earth over Bethlehem—and they do it again today. In the sky over Aleppo and Berlin and Mosul and Leipzig: "Peace on Earth with the people of his pleasure."

Yes, one could resign oneself if one looks at this world. But you could also celebrate Christmas. And tune into the promise of God for this world…That would not be post-factual reality denial, but would be at best counter-factual and pre-factual action. Because God created facts when [God] was born wrinkly-red as a baby. And God will create facts. “Because every boot that goes on sounding, and every coat,

\(^{186}\) In German: “Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt, dass er in politisch verwirrenden Zeiten einen neuen Anfang schenkte und das Licht zurückbrachte. Letztlich stehen die Chancen schlecht für die Finsternis und das Böse. Letztlich hat es längst verloren angesichts der Liebesgeschichte Gottes” (Deeg “O du fröhliche” 3).

dragged through blood, will be burned and consumed by the fire” (Isa 9:5). No war, no noise, no screaming will [there] be [any] more. We will live in the light and do the truth.

Tonight, Christmas Eve, sets us in tune, takes us already into this reality. In these minutes, the atmosphere is changing out there….It will not be Christmas because the world and its people are so perfect and whole. It will be Christmas because God becomes human in the midst of the hopeless world—to benefit you, human.

We will sing "O du fröhliche" and tune into God's love story—thereafter, after the Benediction, before we break out into the streets of this city and into our apartments. We will be in the middle of the darkness praising the light. Because God so loved the world, that this Christmas time, yes, even this Christmas time in 2016 is cheerful and gracious.188

4.6. Concluding Reflections on Listening to Servant Israel

The analysis of Deeg’s insights into the nature, interpretation, and proclamation of the texts that Jews and Christian hold in common, highlights many of the ways in which Deeg calls for a commitment to listening to marginalized (in this case, Jewish)


Der heutige Abend, der Heilige Abend, stimmt uns darauf ein, nimmt uns schon mit in diese Wirklichkeit. In diesen Minuten verändert sich die Atmosphäre draußen….Es wird nicht Weihnachten, weil die Welt und ihre Menschen schon so perfekt und heil wären. Es wird Weihnachten, weil Gott inmitten der heillosen Welt Mensch wird – dir, Mensch, zugute.

Wir werden „O du fröhliche“ singen und einstimmen in Gottes Liebesgeschichte – nachher, nach dem Segen, bevor wir in die Straßen dieser Stadt und in unsere Wohnungen aufbrechen. Wir werden inmitten der Dunkelheit das Licht preisen. Denn also hat Gott die Welt geliebt, dass diese Weihnachtszeit, ja, auch diese Weihnachtszeit 2016 eine fröhliche ist und gnadenbringend” (Deeg “O du fröhliche” 3). Note, Deeg’s last word, gnadenbringend, can be used to refer to the sacramental communication of grace.
voices that enlighten and interrupt. While the roots of Deeg’s commitment to this kind of listening may have developed with his epiphany about Sanhedrin 98a (if not earlier), the telos of such work is nowhere near its completion. Deeg’s writing on Old Testament interpretation and preaching, then, offers several important developments in the on-going work of preaching the Old Testament. These developments are presented here as three theses and three (unanswered) questions:

Thesis 1: The Old Testament is beneficially foreign. Here Deeg navigates between two prevailing hermeneutical options. The first option interprets the Old Testament as words by and about Christ for the Christian believer. This hermeneutic often employs spiritual and pietistic readings that ignore or replace “Israel” with the Church—or even substitute in the individual Christian believer. The second hermeneutical option overcorrects the error of the first by labeling these texts as historically and culturally distant. By emphasizing the ancient Israelite contexts behind the texts and by cataloging its pre-christian conceptions, this hermeneutic often implies (and sometimes openly asserts) that the Old Testament is largely irrelevant to Christian understanding and practice.

Deeg’s approach recognizes the constructive elements of both the historical and spiritual approaches without repeating their destructive elements. He acknowledges that Christians are not Israel nor a modern Jewish body. The text is indeed other, or foreign, to Christians. At the same time, Deeg acknowledges that one cannot understand the New Testament or articulate anything about Christ without the Old Testament. Furthermore, through Christ Christians have been made a part of the chosen people, Israel. Thus, Deeg argues that the Christian is one who is both an outsider and an insider to the texts of the
Old Testament. In light of this standing, Christian preachers should neither write off these texts as “old” nor co-opt the texts as if they were a tool for our own use. Rather, Christian preaching of the Old Testament requires a humble attitude and a listening posture toward the text and toward its Jewish interpreters.

Thesis 2: The language and imagery of the Old Testament are vital for the preaching moment. This is the effect of Deeg’s argument about the use of imagination and meticulousness. This is also one of the most important acts involved in listening to the voice of another—actually paying attention to what is said. Deeg asserts that the Old Testament is not a problem to be solved or a promise to be fulfilled in a New Testament text. Neither is the Old Testament a springboard to the theme of the day; it is not a tool to say whatever the preacher wants to say; it is not an obscure means of arriving at some universal principle. No, the words and images of the text themselves should be allowed to speak to the preaching context in a way that does not minimize or limit their meaning. Such preaching is marked by observing, questioning, interpreting, expecting, imagining, dialoging, interrupting, and being interrupted.

Thesis 3: Christian preaching can be messianic without being anti-Jewish. While, Deeg does not hold that no Old Testament sermon should ever say “Christ,” neither does he assert that Christian sermons on the Old Testament must say “Christ” in order to be Christian. Or, stated another way, speaking “Christ” over the words of the Old Testament does not automatically make the sermon Christian. Rather, as Deeg argues, Christian
messianic preaching has faith that Christ is present, preaching in, through, and despite the words of the sermon. Such preaching takes Jewish presence and objection seriously. This stance is not merely an effort toward the amelioration of inter-faith conflict. Rather, Deeg believes—and rightly so—that many elements of Jewish understandings of messiah can help Christian theology and proclamation. Messianic preaching that is aware of Jewish presence can help to form a christian body that is part of an ongoing politically acting, messiah-awaiting movement, open to God’s surprising interruption of time.

Such a movement would rely on more dialogue than the Church often allows. This leads me to raise three questions about Deeg’s work that require further examination:

Question 1: Can dialogical preaching with Jewish voices work? Despite the example of Deeg’s sermon above, I am not convinced entirely that any sermon with Jewish voices would be received by the congregation as dialogical—much less as disruption. There is such a long history in the Church of ignoring and/or appropriating Jewish perspectives in Christian sermons that much would have to be done to break the congregation’s genre expectations. This is to say nothing about the way the liturgy shapes expectations.

It would be helpful to explore in further research what sorts of cues could help the preacher communicate to the congregation that her or his citation of a Jewish source is more than a mere straw man to be obviated by the end of the sermon. I am thinking of work like that of Marlena Lorensen, who was cited in the previous chapter. Deeg seems

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189 Note that in Question 3 I ask about congregations engaging in actual interfaith dialogue within community to set stage for this kind of preaching.
to lift up Bhabha’s Third Room dialogue as the potential model. However, the pulpit is hardly a third room.

Furthermore, the expectation that dialogue partners leave changed could negatively impact scripture’s voice and imagery—if not handled properly. Consider what Deeg does with John 3:16 in light of its encounter with Jewish presence: “God so loved the world that he gave a new beginning and brought back the light in politically confusing times.” While it may be clear from this re-write that Jewish presence is no straw man in Deeg’s sermon, the actual words of the scripture are lost! And, even in this sermon Deeg returns to Jesus near the end of his sermon. It would be interesting to ask those in the congregation that day whether Deeg’s use of Hanukkah raised their sense of Jewish presence and partnership. I am inclined to trust Deeg with such rewrites, but it is easy to imagine how this practice could be abused. Indeed, more work is needed in order to help the preacher shift congregational expectations with regard to Old Testament and Jewish perspectives.

Question 2: How does attention to power dynamics affect the use and evaluation of sources? While such a question is latent within Deeg’s approach to preaching Old Testament and engaging Jewish perspectives, it is at times surprisingly muted. For instance, Deeg’s assessment of Notger Slenczka seems to focus more on his understanding of history than his assumptions about a particular branch of German liberalism being the definition of “Church.” The question of power is also more pressing than Deeg acknowledges in the use of others’ voices for dialogical preaching and
disruption. How can the preacher safeguard the disembodied and unrepresented voice from manipulation and misunderstanding? Perhaps, Deeg’s observation about the necessity of open-ended imaginative interpretation can help in this situation, but more reflection is needed here.

Question 3: How might a more overt engagement with contemporary Jewish scholars help to foster better dialogical models and attend more overtly to power dynamics in scriptural interpretation? Already, Deeg is moving toward exploring this question. In a recent lecture analyzing the 21 volumes of preaching meditations set in Christian-Jewish context, Deeg notes that contemporary Jewish voices are neglected. Deeg, himself, is also actively involved in study and dialogue with Jews in Germany and Israel. At times, Deeg makes reference to these perspectives. Most often, however, Deeg’s Jewish interlocutors are long since deceased. While Deeg seeks to treat these sources fairly, the

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190 Deeg argues in his lecture on January 22, 2017, “Wie Notwendend ist jüdische Schriftauslegung für die kirchliche Praxis?” that the Predigtmeditationen im christlich-jüdischen Kontext: (1). Show clear favorite sources: e.g. Mishna-Avot - the "Proverbs of the Fathers", which are often quoted as quotations; the Chassidic stories in the treatment by Martin Buber; and Jewish authors and discussion partners from the 20th century, such as Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, as well as Nathan Peter Levinson, Pnina Nave Levinson and (more rarely) Shalom Ben-Chorin. (2). Make rare use of other sources such as: Hellenistic Judaism (such as Philo or the other tradition); Medieval Judaism is quite rare; This is true even for Rashi; Even more so for the mystical tradition (occasionally there are mentions of the Zohar); The Judaism of the Haskala, 19th century Judaism, Jewish sermons from this time - all of this does not actually occur in the volumes; Present Jewish voices, for example from the USA or Israel, are few. However, Also the works of Jewish lyricists. (3). Show little proficiency in Jewish studies: “We are (as a rule) no Judaists who could consider Jewish exegesis through the centuries to the present.” (4). Barely mention Halakah in the meditations. (5). Show an interest mostly in structural analogues, narrative sequences about Biblical verses themes, or questions, and theological challenges.
point remains that they are not present to clarify their own insights or correct any misinterpretations. An actual dialogue cannot happen with most of the sources that Deeg engages in his written work. As such, it would be interesting—and exceedingly helpful—to hear more from Deeg about his conversations with contemporary Jews. Furthermore, it could be transformative for congregations to enter into relationship and dialogue with Jewish partners. What are the questions Jews would ask of Christian thought and practice? Where do Jews push back? Are there places where Jews affirm Deeg’s approach? What are the range of ways Jews engage the texts that Jews and Christians hold in common?

It is with this question about contemporary practice that we turn in the next chapter to analyzing a range of contemporary African American approaches to interpreting and preaching the Old Testament.

In his brief essay, “New to Whom?,” Dale Andrews offers a critique of the so-called, New Homiletic, popularized by H. Grady Davis, David James Randolph, and Fred Craddock. While Andrews expresses only appreciation for these homileticians, he observes:

The “new homiletic” was not new to many traditions of oral culture and folk preaching. In particular, the “new homiletic” was never new to black preaching traditions. Whether one refers to induction, narrative preaching, story-telling, phenomenological experience, the preaching event, a happening, an encounter, a movement, hearer participation, hearer response, or the exigency of contemporary language and immediate experience, the new homiletic mirrors long established black preaching traditions, not to mention others. These traditions are not disparate or loosely held either. They form the development of African American homiletics through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and well into the twentieth century alongside the “new homiletic.” I am somewhat surprised this observation did not become a prominent feature of this new homiletic.1

With these words, Andrews presents the new homiletic as less of an innovation in preaching and more of a new way (or another way) to demonstrate the implicit bias against black preaching traditions in “theological curricula in seminaries” and “among the dominating denominations.”2 Andrews’ use of “dominating” tells the story plainly here: The “new” part of the new homiletic cannot exist without the centering of whiteness and the marginalization of black preaching.

2 “Perhaps a major cause for this oversight [of centuries of black preaching styles] is the reality that black preaching was not central to theological curricula in seminaries or among the dominating denominations. Sorry to say, these conditions pervade in many ways today” (Andrews 301).
Andrews’ critique is instructive for an approach to preaching the Old Testament as well. Here too any new Old Testament homiletic might only be so-called by marginalizing black preaching traditions, not to mention others. Recall the quotes in chapter one that lamented the neglect of the Old Testament in preaching. All of them came from white scholars. This litany of white lament was not gathered intentionally but, rather, reflects the challenge of finding assessments of Old Testament preaching from black homileticians that sound anything like what white homileticians have written. Indeed, a thesis like Brent Strawn’s, which suggests that the Old Testament is a dying language, works best when read primarily through a white, mainline ecclesial lens—what Achtemeier refers to as the “many parts of the U.S. church” or, what Davis calls the “European-American churches.”

Conversely, even a cursory reading of black homileticians demonstrates that for centuries large parts of the Old Testament have been regular preaching texts in black pulpits. The Old Testament’s language, its narratives, and imagery shape black proclamation and black theology. So, for example, when William Pipes offered “an interpretative study of old-time Negro preaching as it is reflected today [1951] in Macon

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3 See Matthew R. Schlimm, “Review: The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment. Catholic Biblical Quarterly. Vol 80 no. 3 (Jul 2018): 521-523. Here Schlimm writes, “An additional way of becoming fluent in the Old Testament, thus, is for the rest of the church to pay particular attention not only to someone like Walter Brueggemann, whom S. upholds as exemplary (p. 225), but also to black preachers and others for whom the Old Testament is neither dead nor on life support” (523).


Georgia,” he highlighted eight sermons, six of which focused on Old Testament texts.  

When Henry Mitchell wrote *Black Preaching*, he argued that the Old Testament connected enslaved people with their West African religious traditions and helped them form “a profoundly creative and authentically Christian faith.” This deep identification with the Old Testament is reflected in the numerous examples that Mitchell highlights within his book. When Gardner Taylor gave the Beecher Lectures, he emphasized the “watchman” image from Ezekiel 33 as the metaphor for the preacher.  

When Samuel Proctor introduced his adaptation of the Hegelian-dialectic model, he illustrated it with equal number of Old Testament and New Testament examples.  

When James Earl Massey discussed the burden and joy of preaching, he framed the subject with reference to Isaiah’s frequent use of “massa” (burden) and intentional development of the concept of “anointed servant.”  

When Teresa Fry Brown surveyed black women about their approaches to preaching, she found that they like to preach Old Testament stories, though others also like the “Jesus” aspect of the New Testament.

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Recent contributions from many black homileticians develop approaches to preaching the Old Testament more fully. To be clear, none of these scholars write explicitly about preaching the Old Testament. They focus on vital subjects such as womanist homiletics, the intersection of preaching and justice, the presence of the Spirit in the sermon, preaching lament and hope, the role(s) of the preacher within the congregation, and the use of imaginative language within the sermon. Yet, in their discussion of these subjects these homileticians also make claims about the nature of God, strategies for textual interpretation, inter-testamental hermeneutics, the essence and location(s) of gospel, and the aims of preaching. All of these claims—and many others—can help to fill out an Old Testament homiletic that, heretofore, has been under appreciated (if not largely ignored).

What follows is a sketch of some of the significant approaches to preaching the Old Testament in the works of recent black homileticians and scholars. This work is largely descriptive. My hope is to articulate many Old Testament homiletics that are already present in what William Turner, Jr., has described as “the ether inhaled in the African American church.”12 I seek to highlight the presence of these Old Testament homiletics and to reflect upon their impact for preaching the Old Testament. Of course, not every helpful Old Testament homiletic from the black church can be examined here.

12 Speaking of Richard Lischer’s work on Martin Luther King, Jr., in The Preacher King, William Turner, Jr., writes, “Only a white man could have written that book…Few black preachers or homileticians I know would have taken the time or expended the energy to write a book like his. So much of what Lischer did by way of technical analysis of King’s work is what black preachers take for granted. It is the ether inhaled in the African American church” (William Turner, Jr., “The Holy Spirit and Preaching: The Word That Moves” in Preaching Gospel: Essays in Honor of Richard Lischer (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016) 88).
Such a study is larger than what a monograph could cover, much less a chapter. Thus, I will focus on specific, recent approaches that offer theologies, hermeneutics, and gospel-construals that help the preacher move toward the preaching of Old Testament texts.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these approaches to the Old Testament are similar to what Second Isaiah says to Judahites living under Babylonian and Persian domination. In fact, Dale Andrews explicitly advocates that more preachers learn to preach like Second Isaiah.\(^\text{13}\) While Andrews does not offer much guidance on what such preaching might entail, the earlier examination of Second Isaiah in this dissertation combined with Allen Callahan’s description of African American hermeneutics in contexts of marginalization, offer helpful insights into this ancient exilic, antebellum, and au courant way of preaching. Setting the deep roots of African American preaching traditions in this way paints a fuller picture of an historically durable, theologically rich, and hermeneutically effective approach to preaching of the Old Testament.

5.1. Toward the Good News of the Old Testament

In *The Talking Book*, Allen Callahan describes the various ways in which African Americans came to understand and interpret the Bible under the domination of slavery, Jim Crow, and continuing racism. Notably, Callahan highlights a unique take on the good news of scripture as encountered by an oppressed. He writes that this “talking book”—an expression that described early African American impressions of their masters’ reading—spoke of a God that saved the people from domination with a mighty arm. It sang of the enslaved Israelites who became for African Americans “a successful type of resistance to

tyranny. “African slaves and their descendants discerned something in the Bible that was neither at the center of their ancestral cultures nor in evidence in their hostile American home: a warrant for justice in this world. They found woven in the texts of the Bible a crimson thread of divine justice antithetical to the injustice they had come to know all too well.”

Of course, the encounter with scripture that enslaved people experienced was not always positive. Especially through the lens of slave masters, scripture could become poisonous. It was used to support slavery and the humiliation of African American slaves. The mark of Cain and the curse of Ham were invested with racist meaning. Southern apologists presented a “Pauline mandate” to support obedience in slaves. For this reason, Frederick Douglas once opposed sending Bibles to the South. He did not want any more material for proslavery propaganda. And, Howard Thurman’s grandmother was loath to hear the words of Paul.

Still, the Bible offered a cure to African Americans for the curse of domination backed by oppressive scriptural interpretations. As Callahan describes the Bible, “it was so effective, in measured doses, as its own antidote.” In this way, Jeremiah’s question

14 Allen Dwight Callahan. The Talking Book: African Americans and The Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006) 6, emphasis added. The Bible also became a talking book because enslaved people were prohibited from learning to read; thus the Bible was encountered orally/aurally. The individual’s voice and the community’s songs shared the biblical word (12). Further, enslaved people would see others reading and noted that it seemed as though the book was talking to them. Thus, the “Bible became the chief goal of literacy for African Americans” (19).
15 Ibid. xiv.
16 Ibid. 30.
17 Ibid. 24.
18 Ibid. 33.
19 Ibid. 39.
becomes a stated reality: there is a balm in Gilead. Heaven will be a place of redress.

And, Christianity is a religion of justice or it is no religion at all. God has a history of fighting (even miraculously) for the outnumbered, dominated minority as with Joshua, Gideon, and Saul. Daniel 11:13-15 foretold of a war between the North and South. Ultimately, asserts Callahan, all these Old Testament images and stories developed into four dominant themes within African American interpretations of the Bible: Exodus, Exile, Ethiopia, and Emmanuel.

5.1.1. Exodus

First, the story and book of Exodus became very important in black preaching. As Callahan observes, “The Exodus was the Bible’s narrative argument that God was opposed to American slavery and would return catastrophic judgment against the nation as he had against ancient Egypt.” Thus, Moses became one of the key figures of black hermeneutics. In fact, Callahan notes the assessment of Union Army commander Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who said of his black soldiers in 1864:

> There is no part of the Bible with which they are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of Israel. Moses is their ideal of all that is high, and noble, and perfect, in man. I think they have been accustomed to regard Christ not so much in the light of a spiritual Deliverer, as that of a second Moses who would eventually lead them out of their prison-house of bondage.

Callahan provides numerous examples to underscore the importance of Moses—more than can be surveyed here. However, consider the work of Harriet Tubman, who was nicknamed “Moses,” and who is said to have led over 300 enslaved people to freedom.

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20 Callahan 42.
21 Ibid. 43-4.
22 Ibid. 46.
23 Ibid. 83.
24 Ibid. 94.
through the underground railroad. Tubman composed a song to guide (and warn) slaves in their quest for freedom. This is the spiritual known as “Go Down Moses.” Notably, this song refrains from saying “Jesus.” Rather, it speaks about God in ways that reflect the theology and ethics of Exodus. Consider these two verses:

When Israel was in Egypt land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard the could not stand
Let my people go

“Thus spoke the Lord,” bold Moses said
Let my people go
“If not I’ll smite your first born dead
Let my people go

Reflecting on this song among others, Luke Powery asserts, “The most prominent metaphor in the spiritual homiletical tradition is the exodus.” Death and hope are proclaimed here. Oppression is also named, but the congregational response highlights a divine demand for deliverance. This is capped by the chorus that envisions confronting oppressors directly: “Tell ol’ Pharaoh to let my people go”—or in some versions, “Tell all pharaohs to let my people go.”

God’s work to deliver enslaved and oppressed people is gospel. In the antebellum period, African Americans who escaped to the Midwest were called “Exodusters,” and, some thought of Oklahoma as a promised land. Others who fled North were said to

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25 Callahan 94.
28 Callahan 124.
have caught “exodus fever.” These expressions highlight the connection between freedom, good news, and exodus.

Much more recently, Exodus continues to be centered in homiletic conversation. Dale Andrews calls for a renewed focus on Exodus through the metaphor of “covenant.” Andrews argues that this model provides the best opportunity to join the pastoral and the prophetic aspects of the black church. It holds together the liberation metaphor that is featured in many black academic writings and the refuge metaphor featured in much of black preaching. Further, Andrews speculates that a historical covenant model of black ecclesiology may reestablish a strong mutuality between existential liberation and spiritual liberation.” This assertion rests in the scriptural

29 Callahan 129.
30 Dale Andrews, Practical Theology in the Black Church 90.
31 Andrews Dale Andrews, Practical Theology in the Black Church 90.
32 Dale Andrews, Practical Theology in the Black Church 51. Here Andrews observes, “The major difficulty facing black theology is repositioning itself within black churches without compromising its prophetic identity” (51). He argues that there have been many missteps here made by black theologians. Perhaps the greatest misstep is the ignored and/or underestimated impact of American individualism on the church” (56). In short, for Andrews, the problem is not that black churches no longer care about liberation; the problem is that American individualism (personal salvation, etc.) has affected the church, changing and even hampering an engagement with liberation (58). Individualism has subverted mutuality (60) and led to a bifurcation of the black community (62). It has allowed racism to thrive by weakening the group-centric strength of religious communities (67). And, individualism has fostered a lack of trust between black socio-economic classes (82). Thus, if black theologians and black churches are to bridge the chasm, they must reassess contemporary black spirituality (87).
33 Dale Andrews, Practical Theology in the Black Church 29. Andrews notes that black theologians often critique this refuge metaphor as becoming other worldly. However, the refuge metaphor—even with an other-worldly focus—can still function subversively. Related foci such as creation in the image of God, the Exodus narrative, the suffering of Jesus, and the kingdom of God help to shape listeners with a divine perspective that runs counter to degradation, oppression, ignored and pointless suffering, and unjust systems. In this way Andrews shows that “Spirituality is in partnership with liberation ethics” (49).
34 Dale Andrews, Practical Theology in the Black Church 103.
observation that “Liberation and the religious worship of Yahweh are mutually
dependent.”

Kenyatta Gilbert offers a different take on the good news of Exodus. He asserts
that Exodus preaching helps preachers find hope in the midst of dark times. Though
Gilbert addresses two other “biblical touchstones” for hope—namely prophetic literature
and the witness of Jesus—his book is rooted in and framed by the Exodus narrative.

Gilbert writes that the Exodus story “supplies preachers the most lyrically potent ground
of sacredness for proclaiming hope in the face of human tragedy and collective
suffering.” In other words, the exodus story is a rhetorical resource, a lens for
discovering divine revelation, a basis for offering hope, and a text for discovering the
truth about suffering and systemic oppression. It is gospel!

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35 Dale Andrews, Practical Theology in the Black Church 113.
36 Kenyatta Gilbert, Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons about Justice and Hope
(Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), ix.
37 Gilbert xi.
38 Gilbert x.
39 Perhaps not surprisingly, Second Isaiah regularly preaches exodus as good news to the
Judahites on the margins of the Babylonian and Persian empires. These chapters speak of
God who makes a way in the desert like God made a way through the sea (Isa 43:16-21).
In one Song, the preacher evokes the covenant (Isa 42:6), references YHWH multiple
times—even employing the expression first introduced in Exodus: “I am YHWH” (Isa
42:6, 8). Note that within Second Isaiah, the phrase “I am YHWH” is connected with
calling generations (41:4), offering help (41:13), providing water to those who are
parched (41:17), making covenant (42:6), claiming glory over idols and others (42:8),
giving Egypt as a ransom (43:3), being the creator and king of Israel (43:15), providing
treasures riches (45:3), establishing the supremacy of God (45:5-7), raining down
righteousness (45:8), speaking truth (45:18-19), recognizing a righteous, savior God
(45:21), redeeming that leads Israel in the way it should go (48:17), kings and queens
being made to bow to Israel (49:23), oppressors consuming their own flesh and blood
(49:26). Second Isaiah further declares that because of the exodus, the people can trust
that God will work new ways of deliverance (Isa 42:9). In another Song, the preacher
undergirds the call for Israel to change by pointing to the grace of God’s glory and
strength (Isa 49:5b)—both terms used in Exodus. Kavod, here translated as “honored,”
Gafney’s sermon on Exodus 17 will show below, the exodus account continues to be good news that can challenge oppressors and oppressive systems today.

Gilbert digs deeper into the way that Exodus functions as gospel. He writes more explicitly about the good news that Exodus preaching presents:

Exodus preaching (African American Prophetic Preaching) is concrete and daring discourse that names God and offers a vision of divine purpose. Preaching of this kind serves an emancipatory agenda. Through criticism and symbols of hope about what God intends and expects of God’s human creation, Exodus preaching lands on the ear of the despairing and is dedicated to help them interpret their situation in light of God’s justice and the quest for human freedom.  

While Gilbert is using Exodus to speak about prophetic preaching, he nevertheless identifies here several features of the gospel that can be found in the second book of the Torah. Exodus names God. It is the book where Moses (and everyone else) learns the name YHWH (Exod 3). Exodus also offers vision and divine purpose. Here God speaks words like, “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exod 3:10). Of course, Exodus is also emancipating. It tells the story of people being freed from slavery and systemic oppression, and its teaching seeks to manifest this plays a significant role in the book of Exodus. Pharaoh’s heart is often hardened (a form of kavod) against following God’s call to set the Hebrew slaves free. But YHWH, who is committed to liberation, announces that YHWH will gain glory (kavod) by overcoming Egyptian domination. So too, the preacher announces, the one who joins God in this present work of return and restoration will be gloried/honored (49:5). Such a one will also find strength for the task. The reference in Isa 49:5 to “strength” may also point to the book of Exodus: “The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him” (15:2). Here, with subtle homiletical allusions, the preacher reminds her hearers that the God of the exodus—the God who made, called, and liberated Israel—will empower them again for the work to which they are now called. Indeed, as this brief examination of Exodus in the Servant Songs suggest, Exodus is a regular source of good news throughout the preaching of Second Isaiah.

40 Gilbert 1.
deliverance in a new polity (Exod 20:2). Social justice is key here as a central word of God’s good news. Finally, Exodus offers symbols of hope: plagues, signs, pillars of cloud and fire, manna and water in the desert, etc.

Gilbert’s study of Exodus preaching shows not only why and how the book of Exodus is good news. Gilbert instructs preachers in how to preach like Exodus preaches. The book is his resource and metaphor for preaching. In some ways, it can be seen as a workbook that accompanies his earlier work on the history of black preaching from the Great Migration to Civil Rights. That book also describes the role of Exodus in the history, imagination, praxis, aesthetics, gospel, and pursuit of justice in African American churches. It introduces the “Exodus Preaching Paradigm,” which consists (roughly) of unmasking and opposing systemic evil, offering hope, connecting preaching with concrete actions for liberation, and highlighting beauty in the use of language and culture. Gilbert highlights preachers who embody this paradigm. He says of their preaching, they “literally spoke into existence a way of being in the world that concerned itself with divining intentionality and the power to transform the present.” They show—what Exodus shows—that God’s good news, the gospel, is inextricably bound with justice.

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41 “The preacher who preaches prophetically does not treat social justice (or other sacred values) as something independent from God but as being rooted in and emanating from God” (Gilbert ix).
43 Ibid. 68.
44 Ibid. 102.
5.1.2. Exile

Returning to Callahan’s study of the Bible in the African American church, Callahan asserts that for centuries black preachers and congregations have found good news in the message that God will bring about a response to challenging conditions of living in *Exile*. Psalm 137 held an important vision of suffering and recompense coming for the Babylonians. The year of Jubilee offered a promise of release. However, Callahan argues that prophetic visions and oracles, like that of Ezekiel 37, were the preferred way to speak about what God was going to do for a people in exile. This is a message of life after exile, life after death. It is marked by the embodied presence of the Spirit. It names its location in the United States as Babylon and the Atlantic as the valley of dry bones. Callahan observes, “Just as the valley is the chasm that separates Babylon from the land of Israel, so the Atlantic yawns between America and Africa.”

Thus Ezekiel’s vision becomes a word of hope that everyone lost in the “catastrophic exile of slavery” can live again. Note, there is little evidence in the spirituals about actual return from exile. Rather, the hope was for new and renewed life.

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45 “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion….For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”…How could we sing the LORD’S song in a foreign land?…O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!” (Psalm 137:1, 3, 4, 8).
46 Callahan 59.
47 Ibid. 61.
48 Ibid. 67.
49 Ibid. 74.
50 In Ezekiel, neither past battles nor past sins are at issue. Callahan asserts, “African Americans have fixed on a text that does not treat of the victim-blaming tendency of Deuteronomistic thinking at its worst” (Callahan 78).
51 Ibid. 80.
Such preaching was less about convicting its hearers⁵² and more about empowering them to live out of a vision of God’s future. The hope proclaimed was that God would be present mightily to change the day-to-day situation in exile. Those who sang and preached exilic themes, hoped to "take their bodies back."⁵³ And, these enslaved, exiled bodies sought to be filled with the Spirit so as to join in God’s liberating work in the world.

Today, the theme of living in exile and longing for God’s deliverance continues to be preached in black pulpits. For instance, in a sermon at an inter-faith Watch Night service, William Barber II spoke about learning from the book of Daniel about how to live in America after Donald Trump’s election to the presidency.⁵⁴ Barber proclaims:

> In fact, as we welcome the New Year, let me remind you that there was a time, there was a time when three millennium boys—maybe one of them was in the moral movement of his day, the other was in the black lives movement of his day, and the other was in the fight-for-fifteen movement of his day, I don’t know. But, I do know, Rabbi, the names that the enemy gave them was Shadrach, Meshach, and a bad-negro. Ya’ll know what I’m talking about.

> And, they were dealing with this king who was a narcissist. And, he believed his own press reports. And they tell me he loved to build towers. And nobody had ever seen a tower like Nebuchadnezzar’s tower. And he loved to cover his thing—his towers—in gold. And he loved to make them shine. He loved to build them tall and have meetings in the tower. And he loved people to bow down and worship at the tower.

> Nebuchadnezzar told these Hebrew boys that if they didn’t bow down, he’d throw them in the fire. But what he didn’t know was that those boys had a fire in them already. Those boys had refused to eat the king’s meat, or the king’s drink,

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⁵² Speaking of Ezekiel 37, Callahan asserts, “African Americans have fixed on a text that does not treat of the victim-blaming tendency of Deuteronomic thinking at its worst” (78).
⁵³ Callahan 62.
or the king’s wine at Mar-a-lago—I mean at Babylon. And rather than get drunk with the wine of the world and forget those who had gone before them, they had a fire in them because they kept alive the stories of the deliverance from Egypt. They had a fire in them, because they remembered how Sampson stood up against the Philistines. And they didn’t believe the press. They didn’t believe the tweets that the king kept putting out. While he was tweeting they were singing the songs of Zion. And they were renewing their Spirit.

And the king and his men didn’t know it, but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—they were a part of a moral movement. Because every age has a moral movement. And they didn’t stand down. Instead they said, “Even if God doesn’t change things right now, we’re going to be a witness that standing down is not an option.” And, because they didn’t, they changed the king; they changed the climate; they changed the consciousness; they changed the fire…55

Here Barber uses the three youths resisting Babylonian domination in exile as the model for his congregation to follow in their resistance to injustice, marginalization, racism, and oppression in the United States. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are a witness against Nebuchadnezzar’s narcissism. They are a witness to the congregation about what God can do when they refuse to stand down.

Later in the sermon, Barber offers a long homiletical run that calls the congregation to stand up. This run is based on the good news of what God has done in the Old Testament—in the exodus, in Sampson (somewhat surprisingly), in the songs of Zion from Psalm 137, and in Daniel 3. These texts proclaim the gospel word—God gives God’s people strength to fight against marginalization. God will ultimately deliver God’s people from oppression.

Barber’s preaching follows a long line of African American proclamation about God’s presence with people in exile. Indeed, it follows a preaching tradition with roots

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reaching all the way back to Second Isaiah. Allen Callahan notes that Isaiah offered an important word to enslaved exiles in America—it names the fact that God does not want or will exile. “The God of Second Isaiah,” says Callahan, “all but admits that the penalty of exile was excessive (Isa. 40:2), says he is sorry for exacting it (54:7-8), and promises never to do it again (54:9-10).” Of course, Second Isaiah preaches more than that. These chapters offer good news. As the Servant Songs proclaim: God takes exiles by the hand and keeps them. God will restore, raise up, and liberate the world. God vindicates exiles—“Let us stand up together.” God will allot exiles a portion with the great. This is good news that inspires response.

In some ways Barber’s preaching merely reapplies the same (effective) exilic message. Texts like Daniel teach us how to live in trying times. They show us what it looks like to have faith, how to resist tyrants, and for what we may hope. In speaking of Trump and the powers that led to his election, Barber is also speaking about white supremacy—a form of racism that antebellum slaves would find familiar.

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56 The movement Barber helps leads is called “Repairers of the breach” and is based on Isaiah 58:12. See https://www.breachrepairers.org, accessed 1 August, 2019.
57 Callahan 77.
58 Isaiah 42:6: “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you.”
59 Isaiah 49:6: “[God] says, ‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’”
60 Isaiah 50:8-9: “he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.”
61 Isaiah 53:11: “Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong.”
Yet, unlike then, Barber is using exilic texts to address a broader audience than the direct victims of white supremacy. He seeks to form an exilic coalition of rabbis, imams, evangelicals, straight and gay, rich and poor, black, brown, and white. Unlike preachers who seek to connect exile to their middle-class American hearers through treatments of psycho-spiritual suffering, Barber assumes that these exilic texts can speak in their original modes to anyone who would hear and respond. He assumes that even some Babylonians may want to join in the movement.

Further, Barber expands exilic preaching to include climate justice.62 When he proclaims of the three youths: “And, because they didn’t, they changed the king; they changed the climate…”, he is speaking not only about the political climate but about the environment. Given that climate change disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized in the United States, this connection is not entirely surprising. With this move, Barber models a powerful way in which exilic texts speak today of resistance that envisions dry bones living (Ezek 37), fire that does not consume (Dan 3), water flowing

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62 Environmental justice is one of the tenants of the “Moral Agenda” for the Repairers of the Breach. Their website explains: “Climate change, ecological issues, pollution are wreaking havoc on communities, displacing people because of super-storms and “man-made” disasters. All elected officials should support policies that protect the environment and the people living in it. All elected officials should support programs that provide adequate resources for vulnerable communities to be able to prepare for and rebuild after crises caused by natural and man-made ecological disasters. All elected officials should support a just transition away from fossil fuels to clean energy, including providing employment and re-training for workers who currently rely on the fossil fuel industry. Communities of color and poor communities bear a disproportionate environmental burden - forced to live closer to toxic dumping grounds and the pollution from fossil fuel extraction, trash-burning incinerators, and other heavy industries. All elected officials should support policies that will hold companies accountable for the damage they've caused, require them to clean up their messes, and prevent the pollution of communities in the future.” See https://www.breachrepairers.org/moralagenda, accessed 1 August, 2019.
in the desert,\textsuperscript{63} trees planted in dry places,\textsuperscript{64} and gardens flourishing.\textsuperscript{65} Indeed, with an impending climate crisis looming—one that threatens to create an ever-increasing number of climate exiles—the invitation to join with God in acts of caring for the climate is good news.

**5.1.3. Ethiopia**

According to Callahan, a third dominant theme in African American preaching is Ethiopia. Callahan asserts, “As a part of Africa that stands for the whole, Ethiopia took its place in African-American racial consciousness at the center of a biblical cartography of hope.”\textsuperscript{66} This move was seen as a fulfillment of scriptures like Psalm 68:31: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”\textsuperscript{67} Ethiopia, which is referred to frequently in the Old Testament and which has been used to refer to African peoples since the 9th century BCE, became an eponym of hope for blacks in America.\textsuperscript{68}

As Callahan reports, some African Americans actually hoped to connect with and immigrate to Ethiopia. They interpreted Ethiopia’s victories over the Italians in the Abyssinian highlands of Adwa as a sign of God’s “no” to colonizing Europe.\textsuperscript{69} As Marcus Garvey wrote, “We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting

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\textsuperscript{63} Isa. 44:3: “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.”
\textsuperscript{64} Isa. 41:19: “I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together.”
\textsuperscript{65} Isa. 51:3: "For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song."
\textsuperscript{66} Callahan 139.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. 138.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid. 139.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. 162.
\end{footnotesize}
Callahan interprets Garvey to be working out of a vision of “eschatological reversal” that sounds very Isaianic and is very specific to African peoples: “the valleys would be exalted and the mountains would be made low among particular people in a particular place. The people would be Africans. The place would be Africa.”

Nevertheless, despite many hopes of immigrating to Ethiopia, the country was not usually amenable to such appeals. Thus, Liberia became a sort of stand-in for a return to Africa.

Ethiopia also became a touchstone for speaking about black pride. This move was connected to the way Ethiopia is portrayed in scripture as wealthy and wise. (See 1 Kings 10). Ethiopia as shorthand for black pride also connected to their 19th century victory over the Italians. So, for instance, Langston Hughes praises the emancipation that Ethiopia symbolizes: “Ethiopia’s free! / Be like me, / All of Africa, / Arise and be free!”

Callahan also points to Dizzy Gillespie, who dedicated his composition, “Kush,” to “Mother Africa;” it is performed in a 6/4 time that resembles African rhythms. It is meant as a way to celebrate and propagate African musical culture.

More recently, Otis Moss III, preached a sermon on Psalm 68:31 to a multiracial congregation in the chapel at Christian Theological Seminary. In this sermon, Moss
challenges what he sees as a cultural, religious, and educational lie: that “people of African descent have no history and no value.” To respond to this lie, Moss turns his hearers’ attention to Psalm 68:31. About the text he preaches:

The text is actually saying and speaking, that Africa, that Egypt, that Ethiopia are a part of God’s economy. But the challenge of this Psalm of orientation, according to Walter Brueggemann, is that even though you may hear that we are a part of the story, the image that we have in our mind contradicts the truth that is written in the Bible. So, when you think of Moses you think of an N.R.A. activist by the name of Charles Heston. And that image comes into our mind, and we do not see someone of color as being a part of the story—even though in the ancient world Egypt, Ethiopia, Carthage, Axum, Hippo, Alexandria, Cush, Nubia, Archemet was all a part of the ancient story—even though Herodatus said that if you want to go to school you gotta go to a historically black college down South better known as Africa—The University of Karnak...

Having established the presence of Africans in the biblical witness and in early Church history, Moss next turns to examining the implications. He argues first that the presence of African believers in the Bible changes the way we should think about the Bible:

And, when you begin to bring people of African descent into the story, it forces you to look at the Bible completely differently. That even the methodology that we call exegesis has some roots in Africa. Because when we begin to talk about the Septuagint, that word seventy, that translation into Greek, ah but you must know that it was translated for African Jews in Alexandria…

Moss also argues that African Americans should take more pride in their story as a result of the presence and work of black believers from Old Testament times up until

sermon, Moss reads three translations of Psalm 68:31: “Envoys will come from Egypt; Cush will submit herself to God” (NIV); “Princes will come from Africa, and Africa will submit herself to God” (Marcus Garvey); and “Princes will come from Egypt and Ethiopia will submit herself before our God” (Moss’s translation).

77 Otis Moss, III, “Do You Know Who You Are.”
78 Moss, III, “Do You Know Who You Are.”
79 Moss, III, “Do You Know Who You Are.”
today. He preaches that black Christians should “tell your story without any shame…”

He argues that the church and the world benefit from African Americans sharing and promoting black culture. Hiding that story serves capitalism and fascist ideas of ghettoizing. Conversely, telling the story of black culture means celebrating people and movements that have given life to the world. Moss preaches, "But when you begin to talk about black culture, I’m talking about the spirituals. I’m talking about jazz. I’m talking about the blues. I’m talking about utilizing a pentatonic scale in order to play my music so that my music speaks to you in a different way." 

Finally, in a nod to the racial makeup of his congregation, Moss reflects upon the presence of Ethiopia as a glimpse of a community where everyone’s culture is valued and shared in a mutually upbuilding movement of the kingdom of God. He wants his congregation to be unashamed, unapologetic, and unafraid about sharing their story. To motivate this kind of sharing, Moss offers a playful vision:

America’s most beloved hymn is Amazing Grace. Amazing Grace…but really it’s an Africanized hymn….It is John Newton who wrote the words to Amazing Grace. He was a peddler in human flesh, better known as the slave trade. But they say that they don’t know where the melody came from. But, I’m here to let you know where the melody came from: The words came from Newton but the melody came from the bowel of the ship. And they say that it was from the bowel of the ship that a melody came that created Amazing Grace. And, Amazing Grace is the only hymn that you have to play with black keys. In other words, if you don’t have the black keys, you have grace but it’s not amazing. You’ve got to have the black and white keys to play together.

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80 Moss, III, “Do You Know Who You Are.”
81 Moss, III, “Do You Know Who You Are.” This is part of Moss’s argument against “ghetto culture.” Here he preaches, "Ghetto culture is not black culture. That ghetto culture is that which was constructed as a result of capitalism in order to keep a certain group in a position in order to profit over them. Ghetto which comes out of that German idea of ghetto—keeping people separate.”
82 Moss, III, “Do You Know Who You Are.”
83 Moss, III, “Do You Know Who You Are.”
Following this move, Moss traces numerous references to Africa and Africans in scripture from the possible location of Eden all the way to the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion and missionary work in Acts 8. Moss combines this run with notes celebrating the sharing of Irish Catholic and Greek Orthodox culture. Others are already sharing their culture. So, Moss invites the congregation to imagine sharing black culture. “If we are who we are supposed to be, we can teach the world to play a new song, sing a new song, dance a new dance…when you know you’re a child of God!”

Moss’s use of Ethiopia in his preaching is far more constructive than the use of Ethiopia in Isaiah’s preaching. The book of Isaiah has a mixed reaction to Ethiopia. It clearly values the wealth and power of the African kingdoms of Egypt, Sheba, and Ethiopia (Isa. 43:3; 45:14). Isaiah even recognizes Ethiopia as a source of hope in resisting the Assyrian conquest, though God says that Ethiopia will meet the same fate as Israel (Isa 20:1-6). While this appreciation for Ethiopia is often expressed negatively (See Isa 60:6), Trito-Isaiah also holds up a vision where foreigners—and eunuch’s—become “servants” and ministers in the temple (See Isa. 56). This vision seems to be behind Luke’s account of the Ethiopian eunuch—who was reading the book of Isaiah when Phillip met him on the road (Acts 8).

Moss’s reference to Acts 8 in his sermon seeks to build upon a vision of African people sharing their culture and leading the house of God. The kind of preaching Moss

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84 Moss, III, “Do You Know Who You Are.”
85 Callahan 141.
86 Same word as in the Servant Song’s.
advocates is one that “seeks dialogue with Isaiah” among others.\textsuperscript{87} He asserts: “Isaiah and Billie Holiday are doing the prophetic work of taking the covers off of oppression.”\textsuperscript{88} Thus, part of what Moss seeks to accomplish with Ethiopia is simply to underscore the good news, as he preaches: you are a child of God, you are in the story, your story matters.

And yet, Moss expands upon the theme of Ethiopia to lead his hearers beyond Isaiah’s purview—to work that de-centers whiteness. Moss critiques North Atlantic culture, religion, and education (especially seminary education), and he does so by elevating Ethiopia—by elevating black culture and black bodies. He argues that good news comes to the Church—not only to African American Christians—when black culture is shared.\textsuperscript{89} Moss is not merely speaking here about music and story. He uses Ethiopia to argue that black culture helps the Church be the Church more faithfully, understand the presence of God more deeply, and act to enable communities to live more justly.\textsuperscript{90} This, indeed, is good news.

\textsuperscript{87} “Blue note preaching seeks dialogue with Isaiah, Amos, Moses, the Woman at the Well, a Gerasene demoniac and an imprisoned Paul” (Otis Moss III, \textit{Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015) xiii).

\textsuperscript{88} Moss, III, \textit{Blue Note Preaching} 11.

\textsuperscript{89} One of his metaphors for this is jazz. Moss writes, “The power of Jazz is that Jazz does something that many styles of composition do not do. Jazz says, ‘Everybody has the right to solo. Even though you may have a different instrument coming from a different perspective, you have the right to solo’” (Moss, III, \textit{Blue Note Preaching}, 52.)

\textsuperscript{90} Willie Jennings argues similarly in his work on the Christian imagination. He writes, “By carefully attending to the realities of modernity constituted around and signified by the black and Jewish body Christians might be able to gather what they are in desperate need of, namely, a clear, unobstructed view of a redemptive word spoken to Israel and the Gentiles. However, the significance of these bodies will be fully understood only as Christians allow black and Jewish situations to illumine the white body and the constructing realities of whiteness” (Willie James Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 285).
5.1.4 Emmanuel

According to Callahan, the fourth and final dominant theme in African American preaching is that of Emmanuel. Because this is a theme largely about Jesus I will not examine it at great length for this study of Old Testament preaching. Still, it is important to note a few key elements of this approach to Jesus within black preaching—precisely for the ways in which it affects the preaching of the Old Testament.

First, notice that Callahan chooses to identify Jesus with a Hebrew name: Emmanuel. When Isaiah introduces “Immanuel,” the name functions as a sign that suffering will come upon the people (Isa 7:14). By the next chapter, the suffering people of Israel are directly called “Immanuel” (Isa 8:8). In a similar way, Callahan uses Emmanuel to describe black preaching of Jesus that speaks of a shared reality between the suffering of black Christians and Christ, the anointed one. “The figure of Jesus has signified the suffering of black people, and the true significance of Jesus is signified in their sufferings.”91 The point here is not simply that black people connected themselves to Jesus. The point is that this connection is marked with an Old Testament expression. As Callahan notes, “Even in his glory, African Americans have seen Jesus as Second Isaiah saw the lamb led silent to the slaughter…as ‘the truly innocent victim,’ and so as themselves.”92

One of the intriguing elements of Isaiah’s Servant Songs is that their ambiguous and ever-morphing description of the servant allows the reader/hearer to reflect upon many possible anointed sufferers through whom God might work.93 The anointed and

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91 Callahan 187.
92 Ibid. 239.
93 For example see Isa. 42:1, 44:3, 45:1, and 61:1.

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spirit-filled servant can be a prophet, a people, a leader, and even a lay person hearing these Songs for the first time. Second Isaiah tells us that even powerful, would-be oppressors like Cyrus can be overcome by God’s anointing to open doors for others.94 Reflecting on the way Isaiah 53 has been used in black preaching to connect Jesus’ suffering and the people’s suffering, Callahan assesses: “Jesus is their peer.”95 Again, he adds, “His name has become theirs: Jesus is the John Doe of many thousands gone.”96 Such identification has an impact on the way good news is received.

When Howard Thurman wrote about Jesus, he deliberately connected Christ with the experience of marginalization and suffering. His premise is: Jesus was a Jew; Jesus was a poor Jew; Jesus was a poor Jew from a minority group.97 For Thurman, Jesus is, quite literally, God with us in suffering and marginalization.98 Jesus shows us further that the way of hatred is counter to God’s way.99 Rather, God’s way of love challenges hate and oppression, and when we live out this love we—like Jesus—are deeply connected with God.100 This shared experience of Christ and the sufferer is a word of good news

94 Isa. 45:1: “Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed.”
95 Callahan 238.
96 Callahan 223.
97 Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 5-8.
98 “Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew of Palestine when he went about his Father’s business, announcing the acceptable year of the Lord” (Thurman 6).
99 “Jesus rejected hatred because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with his Father” (Thurman 77-8).
100 Thurman 102. Callahan argues, “The Christ of African-American Christians could so easily be a prophet to African-American Muslims because he was a Christ bigger than Christianity, a Jesus who transcended the formulas of doctrine and dogma that Christian tradition used to talk about him” (203). Such an assessment could easily apply to Thurman’s articulation of Jesus, and Callahan later applies this to James Cone as well (204).
that oppression can be resisted with love and that even the worst suffering is not beyond the care and redemption of God. It is also a message that the good news of Christ extends beyond Christianity to any who would suffer marginalization or seek to resist oppression.\textsuperscript{101}

Second, Emmanuel points to a key element of African American hermeneutics. Callahan observes that many African Americans deeply link the Old Testament and the New. Lawrence Levine has boldly stated the dynamic this way: there is an Old Testament bias in black preaching.\textsuperscript{102} Callahan’s assessment is more subdued. He writes, “King Jesus and his kingdom were not revelation proprietary to the New Testament alone. Indeed, the distinction between the two Testaments was one \textit{without a difference}.”\textsuperscript{103} This hermeneutic works in the other direction as well. Callahan explains, “In the old Negro spirituals, the New does not supersede the Old. The Two Testaments, Old and New, are correlated to each other. Moses is not a ‘type’ of Jesus. Both bear witness—eternally, equally valid witness—to what God has done and is doing in the world.”\textsuperscript{104} Consider the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{101} Second Isaiah argues that the one on whom God’s spirit alights will enact justice. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1). So too, the preacher says the people will be anointed with the spirit and take part in God’s work in the world (Isa. 44:3).

\textsuperscript{102} Callahan 188, citing Lawrence W. Levine, \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 50.

\textsuperscript{103} Callahan 189, \textit{emphasis added}. This hermeneutic also implies that Jesus is everywhere in the text. Thus, one can find Jesus in the image in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Daniel 2:31-35 (191). And, Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ flight to Egypt is understood as a move to make Jesus, Israel personified (236). Furthermore, books like Joshua and Revelation are seen as describing analogous themes: the fiery martial victory of God (193). In this way, Jesus becomes bigger than Christianity, more than what is captured in propositional creeds (203-4).

\textsuperscript{104} Callahan 189.
\end{footnotesize}
spiritual, “O Mary Don't You Weep.” Here the Old Testament and New Testament bear witness together, connecting the tomb of Lazarus with the Exodus deliverance: “O, Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you mourn; Pharaoh’s army got drowned.”\(^{105}\)

Furthermore, when Frank Thomas lays out his theology of celebration, he reflects on Jesus’ preaching of Isaiah 61 (Luke 4). His work is intentionally inter-testamental. Thomas notes that Isaiah preached a word of judgment initially but also “offered hope of redemption and restoration of the nation.”\(^{106}\) This gospel word proclaims, “Israel was not only to be redeemed, but God was going to redeem the entire human order. God’s age of peace, healing, and wholeness would dawn throughout the world. The Messiah, the Anointed One, was to be the bearer and establisher of the new domain and age.”\(^{107}\) Strikingly, Thomas asserts that Jesus selected Isaiah as a way to understand and announce his missional identity. “When Jesus chose Isaiah 61 . . . He was announcing that God’s dominion was established, and all oppression was overcome.”\(^{108}\) While it is surely an overstatement to say “all oppression” is overcome, the important point is that the intersection of Luke 4 and Isaiah 61 presents the Old Testament and New Testament as eternally, equally valid witness to God’s work in the world. This work continues through

\(^{105}\) See below Cleo LaRue’s theology of the Sovereign God, which weaves together Old Testament and New Testament theology and highlights the Creator God as the one who raises Jesus from the dead.  
\(^{106}\) Frank Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching Revised and Updated* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2013), 37.  
\(^{107}\) Thomas 37.  
\(^{108}\) Thomas 38.
the resurrection, says Thomas. Here “God vindicated Jesus and his announcement of the
dominion of God.” Therefore, our proper response is to celebrate this good news.¹⁰⁹

Callahan’s study of African Americans and the Bible shows that regular and
meaningful preaching of the Old Testament is deeply connected with an Old Testament
conception of good news. Exodus, Exile, Ethiopia, and Emmanuel all frame God’s work
in the world through Old Testament narratives, Old Testament language, and Old
Testament imagery. Together they proclaim that God liberates. God enables resistance
that brings change for those in exile. God made you as God’s child and wants you to
share your story with the world. God joins with you in the experience of suffering and
vindicates the suffering servants of the world. Second Isaiah participates in each of these
modes of good news preaching. Contemporary black preachers and homileticians also
announce good news in these ways. More than this, examination of their work shows that
they expand Exodus, Exile, Ethiopia, and Emmanuel to address not only the direct
experience of African Americans but also the experience of immigrants at the U.S. border
(see Gafney on Exod. 17), the response to fascism and to climate change (see Barber on
Dan. 3), the need in the Church for intercultural sharing (see Moss on Psa 68), and the
God who is with sufferers in every place and time (see Thurman on Jesus and the
disinherited). These examples demonstrate that good Old Testament preaching requires
that one announce Old Testament good news.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas 39.
¹¹⁰ Thomas 39.
5.2. Toward a Theology for Old Testament Preaching

Building off of the historical work of Callahan and of contemporary illustrations from preachers and homileticians, it is clear that black preaching articulates good news in a way that emphasizes a distinct identity and description of the presence of God. While there is a tradition of “turning-to-Jesus” near the end of many black sermons, it is striking for our study of Old Testament preaching just how significant the other two persons of the Trinity are for the theology of many black homileticians. Specifically, recent approaches to preaching from black homileticians emphasize the role of the sovereign God and celebrate the active presence of the Holy Spirit.

5.2.1. The Sovereign God

In The Heart of Black Preaching, Cleo LaRue examines numerous exemplary preachers to uncover what might be the most important elements demarcating black preaching. He finds that three crucial dynamics are central. First, a sociocultural context of marginalization and struggle defines the preaching situation. As LaRue asserts, “Without question, African American preachers, as well as their primary listeners, live in a society that has rejected, debased, and discriminated against them and continues to do so.”111 Second, black preaching is marked by sermons that address five life experience categories. These categories are personal piety (i.e. heart religion), care of the soul, social justice, concern for corporate life, and maintenance of the church.112

Finally, LaRue argues that central to black preaching is belief in a powerful, sovereign God. He asserts,

112 LaRue 27.
An all-powerful God continues to be a precious attribute for a majority of those who constitute the African American faith community, and there is no doubt in their minds that this mighty sovereign is able to save….Marginalized blacks have historically believed that a God who does not care does not count. Thus, a mighty God who takes up the cause of dispossessed African Americans is the major premise that undergirds powerful black preaching.\textsuperscript{113}

Note here how emphasis on the sovereignty of God is linked to a context of suffering and marginalization. As LaRue explains, the experience of persistent and systemic racism “required the enunciation of a God and a gospel that spoke to their plight in a meaningful, practical, and concrete way.”\textsuperscript{114} This practical, concrete gospel is engaged through LaRue’s five preaching categories. In this way LaRue demonstrates the connection between context, homiletical theology, and preaching content.

Importantly, LaRue is not merely referring to a doctrinal category when he speaks of the sovereignty of God. This is more than an argument from Reformed theology. LaRue demonstrates that black preaching significantly emphasizes the sovereignty of the first person of the Trinity. This emphasis on God can be seen in New Testament sermons,\textsuperscript{115} but it is especially prominent as the theological key for Old Testament sermons. LaRue makes this point emphatically in his analysis of exemplary black preachers. Thus, he shows that Alexander Crummell (1819-1898), a black Episcopalian,
preached sermons on Psalm 33, Leviticus 25:10, and Isaiah 61:7 that foster “basic faith in the power and involvement of God in earthly affairs.” Francis J. Grinké (1850-1937), a black Presbyterian in a largely white church, preached regularly of “a God who acts mightily on behalf of the marginalized and powerless,” using metaphors from Exodus in his sermons to present God as liberator and provider. Elias Camp Morris (1855-1922), a Baptist minister, preached from Genesis 45 and “primarily understood God to be an immanent, real force in human affairs.” More recently, LaRue highlights a sermon from Jeremiah Wright, Jr. on Judges 16 where he claims, “God clearly acts in the story on behalf of those who honor and recognize God’s sovereignty.” Katie Cannon preaches on 1 Kings 22 to highlight God as an “empowerer of truth-tellers and a way-maker for those who have the courage and fortitude to tell the truth, notwithstanding the

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116 LaRue 37. LaRue highlights Crummell’s sermons on Ps 33:12 (“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord”); Lev 25:10 (on coming Jubilee after decades of suffering, 38); Isa 61:7 (highlighting that God will reverse roles, 41). LaRue understands Crummel’s theology as pointing out that “the current trials and hardships blacks are experiencing are clearly intended by God to be restorative, not destructive” (42-3).
117 LaRue 45, 50. Grinké preaches on Exodus 1:9-10 (“God continues to act on behalf of those who are oppressed and marginalized by the powerful in society,” 46) and on Acts 11:2-3 where he draws comparison between Jews in the text and white America who claim a narrow definition of election that benefits them and allows for contempt for other races (51).
118 LaRue 62. Morris preached Genesis 45 (Joseph sold into slavery, contrasted with the parenthood of God, 63).
119 LaRue 78. Wright preached on Samson and Delilah to focus on the source of strength in the Spirit of God (72). Here, as LaRue argues, “Wright wants the congregation to understand that what made Sampson so strong was the work of a sovereign God who created Samson for a special work in life even before his birth” (75). LaRue also highlights a Wright sermon on Mark 1:21-31 (cleansing of a man with an unclean spirit & healing of Peter’s mother-in-law). He LaRue asserts, “Although Wright says “the Lord” stepped in and blessed the situation, examples of the unexpected blessings he cites to support his claim explicitly come from the hand of God: Sarah giving birth to Isaac…Moses encountering the voice of God…Hannah…and Isaiah’s life-altering encounter with God in the Temple…” (80).
Mozilla Mitchell preached on 1 Kings 17 to emphasize that God is “on the side of those who trust and obey God even in the midst of desperate circumstances.”

Carolyn Ann Knight preached on transition from Moses to Joshua in Joshua 17:13-18 and claims that the “genuine source of greatness in all human beings is not gender, race, or class but God.”

Summarizing the findings from his study of exemplary preachers, LaRue writes, “Blacks have long believed that it is the Creator God who works mightily in human history to accomplish God’s purposes.” This is not to say that black sermons neglect reference to the second (or third) person of the Trinity. Rather, as LaRue notes, while much of black preaching ends with a turn to Jesus what is often overlooked is that “the fate of Jesus is completely in God’s hands.” It is God who raised Jesus from the dead. In fact, with rhetoric that alludes to advice often heard about christological preaching, LaRue counsels, “I am not arguing that every sermon ought to have the word ‘God’ in it, but each sermon should concern itself with God’s essence and actions…. Clearly, preaching Christ is important, and LaRue’s study of sermons demonstrates this point. However, “The sermon must be about God!” So even with Jesus’ resurrection in the

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120 LaRue 88.
121 LaRue 97. Mitchell focuses on the famine 1 Kings 17, which she connects with her congregation’s experience of a depressed economy, high crime, joblessness, and general insecurity (96).
122 LaRue 106. Intriguingly, LaRue critiques Knight’s turn to Jesus at the end of her sermon as "an afterthought tacked on” that takes away from the clarity of the message (110).
123 Ibid. 112.
124 Ibid. 112.
125 Ibid. 115.
126 Ibid. 115.
Gospels, “The demonstration of God’s power is fundamental to understanding what
drives, motivates, and gives shape and life to the creation and organization of the black
sermon…It is the distinctive factor in black preaching.”

LaRue helpfully calls preachers to pay attention to the way in which sermons identify God. Such identification does not require a New Testament source. Neither is it limited to the way in which the sermon scripture names and describes God, though good preaching certainly will engage the text. Rather, LaRue points to a method of identifying God in the sermon that requires the preacher to be attuned to ancient and contemporary contexts of oppression and suffering and to then track the biblical witness of God’s response to these kinds of contexts. This assertion holds two important shifts for Old Testament preaching.

First, focusing on the sovereignty of God as the theological center of the sermon provides equal theological grounding for Old and New Testament preaching. Within LaRue’s homiletical theology, Jesus continues to reveal God (as in the classic theological dictum), but God is not understood as (previously) hidden in the Old Testament. Rather, from creation through the incarnation and to the eschaton God reveals God’s self as present, active, and intervening—creating, covenanting, calling, coming, and christening. Such an approach offers a theological challenge to what Flemming

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127 LaRue 112-3.

Rutledge has described as the rising trend of Jesus kerygma—preaching that “focuses almost exclusively on the person and teachings of Jesus...[and] neglects the God of Israel.”129 By contrast, the preachers that LaRue highlights speak of God in the Old Testament as involved, as acting mightily on behalf of marginalized people, as an immanent and real force, as empowerer of truth-tellers, as a way-maker, and as a source of greatness. Or, as one preacher proclaims: God clearly acts in the Old Testament!

By focusing on the sovereignty of God, the preacher expands the good news about God to all of scripture. If the good news is that God works mightily in human history, then the gospel is not limited to the first four books of the New Testament. LaRue’s survey of black preachers demonstrates this point emphatically. Furthermore, even the gospel of the Gospels rings with a different resonance when sovereignty is highlighted.

LaRue demonstrates this in his sermon on Isaiah 53:1-6 and Matthew 20:17-28:

In obedience to God’s will, he took a birthday in time and was born of suspect parentage, in a third-rate country, in a forgotten corner of the world. In obedience to God, he gave up his rightful seat in that celestial city that was older than Eden

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129 Flemming Rutledge, And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 5. She adds, “During the first decade of my ministry, parishioners frequently told me that they were uncomfortable with my frequent evocation of the name of Jesus. Among Episcopalians, this was considered suspiciously déclassé; only backwoods, tent-revival evangelists called upon “Jeesus.” I never hear that complaint anymore. On the contrary, the “Jesus kerygma” now dominates the scene” (6). Rutledge’s objection to this approach is not merely on hermeneutic or theological grounds. Rather, Rutledge is concerned about the ethical implications of the way the Old Testament is read and proclaimed. She asserts, “Since the murder of six million Jews in the heart of Christian Europe, we can never again read the Hebrew Scriptures in the same way” (3). Her proposal is that Christians should simply seek to discover and proclaim “the Three-Personed, Trinitarian God” (7). Of course, Trinity is itself a Christian construction that Jews would reject and many others may find problematic when applied to Hebrew texts. For this reason, LaRue’s suggestion that all of scripture be grounded in the sovereignty of God is to be preferred. It begins and ends with a focus on the God that the Old Testament writers might recognize, while allowing for a turn to Jesus (and inclusion of the Spirit).
and taller than Rome. In obedience to God, he traded in the praises of angels for the sin-stricken curses of lost humanity; he traded in a crown for a cross and a throne for a tomb. In obedience to God, Jesus the judge was judged in our place. He who knew no sin became sin for us and died a despicable death on a bloodstained hill just outside of Jerusalem.

But because of his faithful obedience, God raised him from the dead, and has highly exalted him, and has given him the name above every name…”

That this move sounds like aspects of New Testament theology—see especially Philippians 2:4-11—underscores that LaRue is not talking about a heterodox invention but, rather, an important shift in focus within black homiletical theology.

This focus holds a second implication. The sovereignty of God in black preaching—and in good Old Testament preaching—is not an abstract doctrinal premise to be examined coolly or a simple preaching theme to be applied easily. Rather, the sovereignty of God is an intentional theological response to concrete situations of marginalization in the text and in the world. This approach to preaching holds that God exercises God’s power and presence in order to alleviate suffering, undo domination, and empower those who have been made weak. This is an important alternative discrimen.

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130 Cleo J. LaRue, Jr. “Exceptional Ambition” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* Vol XIX No 1 (1998):9-13, 13. A similar emphasis on the role of the sovereign God in the New Testament can be seen in LaRue’s homiletical reflection on Jesus’ preaching of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4: “The today in Luke 4 of which Jesus speaks is no mere today. This today has the ring of the eschaton about it, for in this today one senses what Thomas Long describes as ‘God’s good future hurtling toward us, bringing the finished work of God to an unfinished world.’ This today signals that the age of God’s reign is here, that the time when God’s redemptive purposes comes to fruition has arrived. This word in its nowness says no to our tendency to get caught up in the paralysis of analysis. It forces us to face the immediacy of God’s promises” (Cleo LaRue, “Living By The Word: Reflections on the Lectionary” *The Christian Century* Vol. 136 Issue 1 (1/2/2019): 18-19, 19).

131 David Kelsey refers to discrimen as the criteria by which theologians determine their use of scripture and its authority. This discrimen is shaped by the patterns and important criteria for theological work in one’s community (David Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) 182). It might be discovered by asking: (1)What aspect of scripture is taken to be
As LaRue explains, “The belief that the scriptures consistently showed God acting in this manner in time [i.e. as a powerful God who’s on the side of the downtrodden] became a way of construing and using all of scripture.” Not only does this way of reading scripture offer an alternative to white normativity and the centering of a white, middle class experience, it challenges a heavenly-focused spirituality that ignores human suffering. It also affects text selection and pulpit theology, for the preacher of this sovereign God must name the divine presence in a way that best serves those who suffer.

In all these preaching moments, the proclamation of the sovereign God helps the preacher to name marginalization and to foster congregational responses to that marginalization in light of the nature of God. LaRue shows that focus on the Creator God is not merely something that preachers in the Old Testament do. His homiletic amplifies these approaches and extends them to even New Testament preaching. Further, he shows

authoritative? (2) What about this makes it authoritative? (3) What logical force is given to the ‘authoritative’ scripture? (4) How is the scripture cited used to authorize proposals? (3-4).

132 LaRue 114.

133 Not surprisingly, the Songs of Second Isaiah can be seen to preach in precisely this way. So, the preacher in Isa 42:5-7 proclaims “God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out…” and in the next breath portrays this Creator God as calling the people to be “light to the nations,” “to open the eyes that are blind,” and “to bring out the prisoners.” In Isa 49:5 the preacher announces that the Lord who “formed” the servant “in the womb” has offered “strength” for the work of bringing/gathering Israel together out of captivity. In Isa 50:8-9, the preacher speaks of the Lord God who “helps” when judicial injustice is threatened by offering vindication and by wearing out oppressive opponents “like a garment.” In Isa 52:13–53:12, the servant who suffered is the one who startled nations and made kings shut their mouths (52:15), the one who led the believing community to repentance (53:4-6). That servant is also the one to whom “the arm of the LORD been revealed” (53:1)—the one who “shall be exalted and lifted up” (52:13).
that focusing on the Sovereign God enables preachers to speak in fresh ways about God’s presence and about human cooperation with the divine in response to marginalization.

5.2.2. The Active, Present Holy Spirit

Of course, black preaching does not only speak about the sovereign God and Jesus. Black preaching also holds an elevated place for the work of the Spirit. James Forbes argues in his classic book on preaching and the Spirit that what matters most for faithful and fruitful preaching is “the level of awareness of the movement of the Spirit shared by those in the pulpit and pew.” For Forbes, the Spirit is not simply a preaching technique or an aspect of theology. The Spirit is the life of and way for preaching. “The preaching event is an aspect of the broader work of the Spirit to nurture, empower, and guide the church in order that it may serve the kingdom of God in the power of the Spirit.” An examination of the biblical witness, for instance, shows that the proclamations of prophets, apostles, and Jesus are marked by an awareness of and engagement with the Spirit.

While Forbes pays particular attention to the life and ministry of Jesus, listing ten different ways that Jesus interacts with the Spirit in the Gospels, his understanding of the connection between the Spirit and prophetic preaching is especially helpful for this study. He argues that Spirit-led preaching resembles the prophetic witness, relying on God to transform words into deeds of liberation. The prophetic witness is the root of the Christian sermon. Forbes writes, “When Jesus proclaimed, ‘Today this scripture has

135 Ibid. 19.
136 Ibid. 37-8.
137 Ibid. 43.
been fulfilled in your hearing,’ he linked the Christian sermon to the prophetic tradition.”

So, in Luke 4:14-30, when Jesus preaches in the Spirit, Jesus preaches the Old Testament. Christ—the anointed one—preaches the Old Testament with a prophetic spirit. For Forbes, this prophetic preaching spirit reaches across ecclesial boundaries, looks for divine insights, evinces a power beyond one’s own words and work, and remains alert to signs of God’s in-breaking kingdom. Such Spirit-led preachers are better able to cope with the reality of the presence of death, because they are listening to more than the voices of contemporary contexts that produce suffering. They also listen for the Spirit leading people out of the grasp of the physical and spiritual powers of this world.

Forbes’ study provides a good starting point for thinking about the Spirit’s role in Old Testament preaching. However, this slim volume provides only a sketch of how the Spirit works in the preacher and the congregation. Forbes barely explores the ways preaching might confront the powers. And, perhaps most importantly, he does not offer specific guidance for how preachers might better prepare themselves and their congregation to receive and respond to the Spirit. All of this suggests greater opportunities for examining further the role of the Spirit in preaching. These are opportunities that Luke Powery takes up in two separate books.

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138 Forbes 43. Though Forbes does not note it, this claim is especially intriguing since the prophets are the largest Old Testament source for New Testament writers.
139 Ibid. 47-51.
140 Ibid. 60, 64.
141 Ibid. 97-8.
In *Spirit Speech*, Powery helpfully suggests that “lament, celebration, grace, unity and fellowship are five key manifestations of the Spirit that one can discern in sermons.”¹⁴² Lament helps communicate grief, loss and crucifixion.¹⁴³ Celebration recognizes the presence of a powerful God leading people from death to resurrection, from suffering to deliverance.¹⁴⁴ With regard to grace, Powery describes the Spirit’s role as creating, forgiving (and testifying to it), transforming, and sacramentalizing (i.e. offering “means of grace”). The main point here is that preaching and its impact are a gift of grace empowered solely by the Spirit.¹⁴⁵ So too, the Spirit is *the* source of unity in the church, and the preacher who promotes unity or laments disunity in her sermons is preaching with the Spirit.¹⁴⁶ Finally, the Spirit centripetally drives us out into fellowship; thus preachers seek to form words and lives that seek justice and resist the powers of death in the world.¹⁴⁷ Taken together, these five homiletic beats provide a metric (of sorts) for the presence of the Spirit in preaching that is significantly more measurable than ecstatic experience and more alive than mere references to the Spirit in a sermon.

¹⁴³ Powery 35.
¹⁴⁴ Though Powery speaks about suffering and deliverance, his language here is more focused on christology. He asserts the same Spirit that leads Christ to the cross and prays in us with groans too deep for words is also the Spirit that raises Christ from the dead (Powery 29).
¹⁴⁵ Powery 50.
¹⁴⁶ As exegeted from 1 Corinthians, the Spirit works unity by lamenting hurt, creating the common confession of Christ, fostering humility, and developing the common good (Powery 75).
¹⁴⁷ As Trinity is fellowship, as Christ came to serve, so the church exists with others and for others (Powery 89).
Unfortunately, Powery does not write much here about the witness of the Old Testament. For instance, after several detailed comments on two Psalms of Lament there is only one reference to the Old Testament after chapter two. The book of Lamentations is never mentioned and (unlike with Forbes) the prophetic witness is minimized. To be fair, *Spirit Speech* does not set out to describe a homiletic for the Old Testament or even for the Psalms of Lament. And the dynamic of lament and celebration might discourage the use of Lamentations. Still, several interesting questions are left off the table by mostly omitting the Old Testament from this discussion. For instance, we might ask, what do Old Testament texts suggest about preaching lament and celebration (a common feature of many psalms, but also of several prophetic texts)? How do African American preaching traditions engage these Old Testament texts of lament/celebration?

Helpfully, these are the questions that Powery picks up in his next book, *Dem Dry Bones*. Here Powery argues, “Preaching that ignores death is irresponsible, a theological lie, and unable to declare real hope. It is, in fact, Spirit-less preaching.” By contrast, the spirituals and Ezekiel 37 (an exilic text) present two lenses on the spiritual preaching of death and hope. What Powery offers with this study is not merely a pneumatology of preaching—which would be significant in its own right. More than pneumatology, Powery develops here an Old Testament homiletic that is rooted in recognizing and responding to the Spirit. This Spirit-centered homiletic argues that preaching the Old (and New) Testament well requires:

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First, the must preacher enter into contexts of suffering and death. In the face of the trauma of exile, Ezekiel envisions preaching in the valley of dry bones. His pulpit lies “in the middle of death.”¹⁴⁹ So too, the spirituals as sermons provide critical responses to the presence of death. They remember human tragedy and recall God’s story of pain.¹⁵⁰ Consider “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen…”, or “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”, or the first verse of “City Called Heaven,” which nearly sounds like part of a suffering servant song:

I’m a poor pilgrim of sorrow,  
I’m tossed in this wide world alone,  
No hope have I for tomorrow,  
I’ve started to make heaven my home.¹⁵¹

Reflecting on the spirituals and Ezekiel, Powery proclaims that preachers “will not be able to articulate suffering and hope authentically if one is detached from these realities and not invested in embodying them. To capture the mood orally/aurally, one has to know death, suffering, hope for him- or herself.”¹⁵² Powery argues here that if you are going to preach like the prophets you have to address hardship, marginality, oppression, and death. If you want to sing like the black bards, you need to “remember the suffering of those forgotten, unwanted, and unneeded, because they too, are humans made in the image of God.”¹⁵³ And if you want to interpret scripture faithfully—especially the

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¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 40, 42.
¹⁵¹ Cited by Powery, *Dem Dry Bones* 67.
¹⁵² Powery, *Dem Dry Bones* 70.
¹⁵³ “The preaching bards call us to remember the suffering of those forgotten, unwanted, and unneeded, because they too, are humans made in the image of God. God’s community is wide and inclusive, challenging our sermons to do the same—to include those who are left out many times and bring the stories of the marginalized into the larger
scriptures of the Old Testament—you must read and preach in a way that grows out of “empathetic engagement with others.”

Second, preaching the Old Testament (and New Testament) well requires that one look for the voice and presence of God. When Ezekiel is in the valley of dry bones, he is led by the Spirit. Powery notes that rûḥ ("breath," "wind," "spirit") occurs ten times in this chapter. It is “spirit of the Lord” who brings Ezekiel to “the domain of death to preach….The spirit of the Lord leads him to a ‘preach-off’ with Death.” So too, the spirituals identify the presence of God in the face of death. For every, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,” there is also sung a “glory hallelujah!” Those who “Wade in the water” to escape sin (and especially in Harriet Tubman’s time—the slave hunter’s dogs) know that “God’s gonna trouble the water.” And, that “poor pilgrim of sorrow” can still sing about “a city called heaven.” Here Powery reminds preachers that just as nothing happens in Ezekiel 37 without the Spirit, so nothing happens in the sermon without the presence of the Spirit working through it. Just as we need wind/breath to make sound, so we need the Spirit to preach….or to sing. And, just as hope comes in the valley of dry bones, so too the spirituals offer hope in the climate of death (often without using the word, hope).

 relational story of humanity and God. To talk about ‘dry bones’ one has to engage those suffering most in society” (Powery, *Dem Dry Bones* 46).

154 “Empathy with the human condition is vital for any genuine voicing of the certain sound of spiritual preaching….Without empathetic engagement with others, it will be difficult to get into the mood that is appropriate for preaching death and hope” (Powery, *Dem Dry Bones* 70).

155 Ibid. 21.

156 Ibid. 52.

157 Ibid. 55.

158 Ibid. 61.
It should also be stated here that Powery does not argue that Spirit led preaching avoids preaching Jesus. Of course Christian preaching of death and hope evokes reflection on Jesus’ death and resurrection. Powery notes that a survey of the spirituals shows a high recurrence of the theme of the suffering of Jesus. One reason for this may be what Callahan also identifies, namely: “Those suffering identify with Jesus’ suffering and can find solace and hope in it.”\(^{159}\) Another reason may relate to assumptions about preaching. As Powery argues, black preaching holds that “If sermons do not proclaim Jesus, they will go nowhere… the good news is not complete until the preacher also proclaims, ‘But early, early on the third day morning God raised him from the dead.’”\(^{160}\)

Words of hope in the face of death must proclaim Jesus who is a “death threat” to death.\(^{161}\) A good example of this is “There is a balm in Gilead,” The spiritual begins by reflecting on death and suffering guided by a prompt from Jeremiah: “There is a balm in Gilead / To make the wounded whole.” It then turns to the enlivening work of the Spirit: “Sometimes I feel discouraged / And think my work’s in vain / But then the Holy Spirit / Revives my soul again.” The spiritual closes with a turn to Jesus that begins: “Don't ever feel discouraged / For Jesus is your friend.”

At the same time, Powery notes that not all spirituals—nor every sermon—name Jesus. Nor do they need to name Jesus. Here Powery follows the witness of the spirituals, noting, “To proclaim Jesus, the death of him, and the hope in him, does not mean that every sermon has to say ‘Jesus’ or literally ‘take it to the cross’ and empty tomb.”\(^{162}\)

\(^{159}\) Powery, *Dem Dry Bones* 86.

\(^{160}\) Ibid. 88.

\(^{161}\) Ibid. 87.

\(^{162}\) Ibid. 91.
Consider, the spiritual, “I’ll fly away,” which speaks directly of suffering and hope but never explicitly names Jesus. Or note that “Swing low, Sweet Chariot” builds on elements of the Elijah/Elisha narrative to speak of death, separation, and hope: “If you get there before I do / Coming for to carry me home / Tell all my friends I'm coming too / Coming for to carry me home.” Of course, Ezekiel 37 speaks of death and hope without naming Jesus, though many Christians might reflect on Christ’s death and resurrection when reading it.

Powery’s point here is that preaching in the Spirit allows for—but does not require—Christian preachers to say Jesus in their sermons. He writes,

> The sermon by itself should not carry this responsibility on its own every week. Ideally the larger liturgical setting of corporate worship would also proclaim Jesus in word and action, thus relieving the preaching moment from bearing the burden of being the only liturgical act that would ever speak of Jesus. Saying this, however, does not relieve preachers from declaring the gracious promises of God on a weekly basis.163

Perhaps because Powery finds a deep connection between singing and preaching in the witness of the spirituals and in his own ministry,164 he is more inclined to recognize that all of the liturgy functions as a Spirit-led sermon. The songs, prayers, and eucharistic celebrations each proclaim a word about who God is and what God is doing in Jesus. The benefit of not requiring Christian sermons to say Jesus is that the preacher is more free to respond to the prompting of the Spirit. They can focus simply on proclaiming a fitting word for their context in this moment. They can feel free to follow the language and perspective of the sermon text—especially if the text is drawn from the Old Testament. In

163 Powery, Dem Dry Bones 91.
164 Some have referred to Powery as the “Singing Dean of Duke Chapel.” On the connection of spirituals and sermons, see the discussion below.
this way, what Powery is requiring of preachers is much more open and responsive than some traditional christologically focused homiletics. He advises: listen to the Spirit and proclaim the gracious promises of God.

Third, preaching the Old Testament (and New Testament) well requires that one offer a word that both critiques the situation of suffering and offers hope from God. In Ezekiel, something other-worldly (heavenly?) happens: the dead, dry bones of those who were on the receiving end of Babylonian conquest become enfleshed. They are given new life. But, these bones do not merely live; the prophet in 37:10 calls them a “very, very, mighty army” (chayil gadol me’od-me’od). These bones live to fight empire again! So too the spirituals touch on heaven as a hope and as a present “principle of social criticism.” As one spiritual proclaims, “Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel…so why not every one.” Powery asserts that the spirituals preach life-giving, community building, words of resistance—often with double meaning. They focus on seeking the good of all, offering weighty words of freedom and dignity. But, like Ezekiel’s mighty army, these spirituals also seek to battle empire. For instance, during the struggle for Civil Rights, the words of the spiritual, “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho,” were adapted to say:

Marching round Selma like Jericho,
Jericho, Jericho.
Marching round Selma like Jericho,

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165 “Preachers should seek to know God and love God unashamedly with their entire being, always desiring to be in touch with God because ‘homiletics is always more than method’ […] Hope is not something that humans generate or create but God sparks” (Powery, Dem Dry Bones 73).

166 Ibid. 68.

167 Ibid. 32-35.

168 Ibid. 48.
For segregation’s wall must fall.

This kind of preaching, Powery writes, comes from “prophets and servants” whom God provides to be "agents of hope in dying communities, contemporary graveyards.” They are ones whom the Spirit enables to be “light to the nations” and to “bring forth justice” as the preacher in Isaiah says (Isa 42:1, 5-6). Here, the preacher/prophet/bard uses words “as nonviolent weapons to fight death and embody God’s hope” on earth. This kind of Spirit-led preaching can draw richly from Old Testament texts, many of which engage in their own fight against death with only the nonviolent weapon of words.

By way of summation then, Powery and Forbes help give shape to a theology for Old Testament preaching. They do not set out to do this. And, their homiletical theology can apply equally to the New Testament, which is an asset. This is not some homiletical scheme, form, gimmick, or theme to be applied only to a select number of texts. This is a functioning homiletical theology that engages the Spirit in a way that makes (more) space for Old Testament texts to speak and to be heard by Christian congregations.

Forbes develops the connection between Spirit-led, Christian preaching and the prophetic witness. As the Spirit led the prophets, so the Spirit leads preachers to rely on God to transform words into deeds of liberation. Powery argues further that Spirit-led preaching does what Ezekiel (and the majority of the Old Testament) does. If Spirit-led preaching laments suffering, celebrates God’s deliverance, describes God’s help, brings

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169 Powery, Dem Dry Bones 81. On this theme Powery writes a bit earlier: “Death may depress but eventually the Spirit will animate hope through speech. Patience in the journey of preaching is essential as we wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled so the world can be made right” (77).

170 Powery, Dem Dry Bones 81. These weapons include a vision of heaven, but any truly, hopeful eschatology “needs to be earthy” (84).
people together, and sends them out to pursue justice, then the Old Testament—and especially the prophetic corpus\textsuperscript{171}—is a reliable source for the preacher. More than that—it is an indispensable \textit{resource}, for the Old Testament resounds with these five homiletical beats of the Spirit.

What Powery and Forbes demonstrate is that this kind of preaching is not an old prophetic trope left for form-critics to uncover or for historians to describe. Rather, Spirit-led preaching helps the contemporary preacher to name the presence of death, point to God, and offer critique and hope. Forbes and Powery describe and help to develop a theology of preaching. Their theology engages the Old Testament and helps preachers faithfully proclaim the Old Testament as a suffering, singing, sorrowful—but spirit-led—word of hope for the Church today.

5.3. Toward a Hermeneutic for Old Testament Preaching

Beyond the theological lenses presented above, some approaches to black preaching offer distinct modes of textual interpretation, the effect of which seems to significantly increase engagement with the Old Testament. These hermeneutics may be identified briefly as midrashic musicality and centering the experience of otherness.

5.3.1. Midrashic Musicality

First, in addition to the theological claims about the Spirit, Powery’s work on the spirituals provides important insights into an Old Testament hermeneutic that might be

\textsuperscript{171} The Servant Songs are merely a microcosm of this larger Old Testament phenomenon. For instance, the first servant song acknowledges the presence of the Spirit twice (42:1, 5). It also laments the suffering of the “bruised reed” and “dimly burning wick” (42:3). It celebrates God’s deliverance through the creation and the covenant (42:5-6) and names help from the God who has “taken you by the hand and kept you” (42:6). It brings people together—the nations, the formerly blind, and the once incarcerated (42:6-7)—and sends all of them out to “bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1) and to establish “justice in the earth” (42:4). In this way the first Servant Song can function as a Spirit-led sermon.
termed, midrashic musicality. These hermeneutic strategies come out of an understanding of the spirituals as musical sermons. Here Powery advances the argument that “slave preachers were probably the main creators of the spirituals.”172 Furthermore, these songs were not crafted as accompaniment to the sermon or in addition to the sermon. They represent the climax of the sermon that may have been initiated by the preacher and taken up by the congregation. As Jon Michael Spencer asserts “it is probable that the more frequent development [of spirituals] was from extemporaneous sermonizing which crescendoed poco a poco to intoned utterance.”173 The important point here is not the definitive establishing of the provenance of one or all of the spirituals. Rather, the point here is that whether it is done through a spiritual, through whooping, or through another form of musicality—the regular use of creative verse, imaginative language, and rhythm have an effect not only in preaching but on scriptural interpretation for preaching.

Musicality is a hermeneutic. William Turner, Jr., argues that while there may be other ways to express it,174 black preaching has regularly used musicality to render present the transcendent God. He writes, “Black preaching draws on these two ideas:

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174 “Human beings have typically found it difficult to utter in ordinary speech the extraordinary pronouncements that preaching requires. The ancient prophets often resorted to signs; the apostles of the early church accompanied their words with signs and wonders; the saints were known to retreat into prolonged silent meditation, only later to emerge with a pronouncement; still others have incorporated the enchanting and mystical powers of music in their delivery.” (William Turner, Jr., “The Musicality of Black Preaching” in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 201).
inspired preaching is a word from another world, and music is a native means by which
to express the ineffable.”175 Thus scriptural words of divine revelation and musicality go
hand-in-hand. Otis Moss, III, says it this way: “The poet, the artist, the dancer, the writer,
and the Hebraic prophet understand the need for metaphor, symbol, double entendre,
image, and sound. We cannot encounter the Holy with easy definitions; nor can we
engage people with words and images with a singular meaning.”176

Cleo LaRue argues that this kind of imaginative language is not tangential to
preaching nor meant for show. Rather, black preachers “believe that language empowers
the marginalized.”177 Thus, these preachers seek to empower the marginalized by using
language “to call forth a world that does not exist.”178 Think of “I have a dream,” which
Martin Luther King, Jr., may have adapted from Prathia Hall’s earlier preaching.179 This
speech calls forth a new possibility for the world in a way that functions like some
apocalyptic and prophetic literature. It is a vision of a world where the Powers that are
currently in control no longer dominate. And, this vision is shared to inspire present
action and resistance. LaRue states further that black preachers use imaginative language
“to create an environment for belief.”180 Here he observes, “Whites are more inclined to
use language for information whereas blacks are more inclined to use it for

175 Turner, Jr. 201.
176 Otis Moss III, Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of
177 Cleophus J. LaRue, I Believe I’ll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching
178 LaRue, I Believe I’ll Testify 96.
179 For a discussion of this issue, see Courtney Pace, “Appendix. Who Had the Dream?
Prathia Hall and the ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech” in Freedom Faith: The Womanist Vision
of Prathia Hall (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2019).
180 LaRue, I Believe I’ll Testify 97.
inspiration….Words, images, stories, slices of life, and so forth are rhetorical tools intended to create an environment…for belief.”

Thus, a preacher might approach scripture looking for similar environments that create contexts of belief. What the witness of the spirituals shows is that often that environment has been the valley of dry bones, the lion’s den, the Jordan River, the Red Sea, Mt. Sinai, and many other places within the Old Testament where stories and images strike the hearer in inspiring ways. Finally, LaRue argues that imaginative language is used “to render God present.” Antiphony, repetition, alliteration, syncopation, oral formulas, thematic imagery—every distinct turn of phrase is meant to help those who hear sermons to experience God. Here LaRue notes, “Unlike many European and mainline American denominations where architecture and classical music inspire a sense of the holy, blacks seek to accomplish this act through the display of well-crafted rhetoric.”

One who desires to craft rhetoric well is likely to seek out and appreciate well-crafted rhetoric in the scriptures used for proclamation.

Here again the Old Testament proves to be a bountiful resource. What many black preaching traditions seem to hold in common with Old Testament writers is the belief that words are powerful. As Moss articulates it: “What is so interesting is that the Hebraic people share with us that God cannot be seen; God is encountered through sound and speech.”

For instance, when Powery writes about the spirituals, he argues not that architecture or sculpted images render God present, but sermons demonstrate the

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181 LaRue, I Believe I’ll Testify 97.
182 Ibid. 95.
183 Ibid. 95.
184 Moss 38.
presence of God. They are “a form of verbal iconography.” This sounds like something that a people commanded not to form images (Exod 20:4) or give praise to idols (Isa 42:8) could appreciate. Indeed, Old Testament writers engage in their own form of verbal iconography that is meant to render God present.

More than that, the writing of Old Testament prophets and scribes, like the preaching of spirituals, do not merely explain something; they do something. Anyone can say that God transcends our theological categories, but something happens when the preacher recounts the scene on Mt. Sinai where God reveals the divine name to Moses by saying, poetically and cryptically: “I am who I am / I will be who I will be” (Exod 3:14). It is one thing to say God is stronger than Pharaoh, but something happens when Miriam takes up her tambourine and everyone sings, “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously/ horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (Exod 15:21). It is good to know that God will take care of you, but it can be transformative to recite the verses of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd/ I shall not want…” And, many have said someone should do something about our situation, but something transformative can happen when the prophet proclaims, “The LORD called me before I was born…And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified” (49:1b, 3). The Old Testament, like the spirituals, often combines music, poetry, and proclamation. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why scholars have struggled to nail down the genre of the Servant Songs. Perhaps this is also one of the reasons black preaching has been so engaged in regular preaching of the Old Testament.

185 Powery, Dem Dry Bones 98.
186 Ibid. 102.
Of course, such language also appears in parts of the New Testament. I am not claiming musicality is only an Old Testament hermeneutic. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that imaginative, poetic, and musical rhetoric is important to many black preachers. Furthermore, since homiletic interests affect text selection, and since the Old Testament is preached more frequently in many black churches, it is reasonable to assume that musicality is a hermeneutic that aids in the preaching of the Old Testament.

Spirituals do not only engage musicality, however. They also present a way of reading scripture that resembles Jewish hermeneutics. Powery observes, “The spirituals, like hymns, function as midrashim…they merge the concerns of the enslaved with the biblical story.”187 This is an important point. Unfortunately, Powery does not really define what he means by midrash. The problem here is that the term is often used by others as a more exotic synonym for creative interpretation. Powery does not intend this, but before considering Powery’s analysis of the spirituals as midrashic music, more should be said about midrash.

Wil Gafney defines midrash as something deeper than creative interpretation or the development of a simple connection between text and context. She asserts,

rabbinc readings discern value in texts, words, and letters, as potential revelatory spaces; they reimagine dominant narrative readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside—not replace—former readings. Midrash also asks questions of the text; sometimes it leaves the reader to answer the questions.188

Importantly, Gafney finds a connection between Jewish midrash, her own “womanist midrash,” and imaginative black preaching. “I have come to recognize the sanctified

imagination as a type of African American indigenous midrash.” She is speaking here of an interpretative tradition that may be even older than the spirituals, but is certainly present in the imaginative works of these black bards.

When Powery argues that the spirituals function as midrash, he means first of all that they seek to engage the reader/hearer with questions about and alternative readings of scripture. Spirituals function out of a hermeneutic that is attentive to human need. Along with rabbinic interpreters, spirituals assume that the Bible “is not just historical narrative” that is past and resolved. Rather, “Spiritual preachers read Scripture for the life and hope of a community.” This “hermeneutical freedom” still respects the Bible as a sacred book. However, it often shows respect by asking questions of the text: “Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, then why not every one?” It leads to the proposal of alternate readings. So Jeremiah asks, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” (8:22), but the spiritual pronounces to the people: “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.” It also focuses on a “communal interpretative lens” that does not close off the input of others (whether preachers or congregants) and is especially attentive to “the unknown, untaught, and unnamed.” The aim is to foster an interpretative environment that leads people to “wrestle with the text until one is blessed with meaningful hope.”

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189 Gafney 3.
190 Powery, *Dem Dry Bones* 113
191 Ibid. 113.
192 Ibid. 114.
193 Ibid. 115.
194 Ibid. 114.
195 Ibid. 114.
Powery also finds that spirituals reimagine dominant readings of the Bible. Here he focuses on the way spiritual preachers demonstrate belief in a loving and liberating Sovereign God.\textsuperscript{196} While not exactly the same as Jewish midrash, the spirituals share with midrash the belief that “God is active and moving, pulsating in the veins of creation.”\textsuperscript{197} This involved God works in and beyond the biblical text—inspires ancient writers and contemporary interpreters. Because of this belief, rabbinic interpreters both add to previous interpretations and hold open their own interpretations to later insights and challenges. In this way the biblical text is valued, but neither it nor a hardened interpretation of it are made into an object of worship.\textsuperscript{198} So too, spiritual interpreters look for how God might use a particular text (or gap in a text) to speak to the current context, expand understanding, and challenge dominating readings. Powery asserts here that the guiding hermeneutic for spiritual preaching is the “belief in a God who acts mightily on behalf of the oppressed.”\textsuperscript{199} This is a God who “loves the least of these, the unwanted, the unknown, the unnamed, and works to liberate them despite opposition.”\textsuperscript{200}

A third aspect of the way spirituals function as musical midrash is in the way they treat the Bible as potential revelatory space. Powery asserts, the spirituals function out of a hermeneutic that engages the Bible deeply.\textsuperscript{201} Here Powery focuses upon a spiritual

\textsuperscript{196} Powery, \textit{Dem Dry Bones} 116.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid. 117.
\textsuperscript{198} Powery asserts, “the spirituals proclaim that God will win and ultimately defeat evil. This is possible in spiritual preaching because it does not suffer from bibliolatry and worship of the Bible. Rather, the spiritual homiletical tradition worships God and God is not confined to a written canon and is bigger than a book, \textit{the Book}” (\textit{Dem Dry Bones} 117).
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid. 116.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid. 117.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid. 117.
hermeneutic for preaching hope and death. These interpretative moves include:

“Reflection Reading,” which treats the text as a mirror of human situation,202 “Amplified Reading,” which emphasizes the text often through repetition,203 “Christological Reading,” which sees Jesus in the biblical text,204 “Intertextual Reading,” which uses all of scripture to interpret one text,205 “Muted Reading,” which uses the Bible selectively to speak to human need,206 “Imaginative Reading,” which is an “African Diaspora midrash” that embellishes the text,207 “Responsive Reading,” which talks back to the text,208 and “Missional Reading,” which uses the text to call for action.209

Of course, not every spiritual engages in all of these hermeneutics. Nevertheless, consider again, “O Mary don’t you weep.” This spiritual begins with the human situation of grief and loss. Lazarus died and his family mourns. Through repetition, weeping and mourning are validated and amplified as appropriate responses to tragedy. The spiritual offers a christological reading. It is based on a gospel text and implies resurrection (though not stated). The most striking feature of this spiritual, however, is the reason why Mary need not weep and mourn: “Pharaoh’s army got drowned.” Here The Exodus narrative helps the preacher articulate God’s response to human suffering. The one who

202 Powery, Dem Dry Bones 117.
203 Ibid. 119.
204 Ibid. 120.
205 Ibid. 121.
206 Ibid. 122. An example here is the story of Howard Thurman’s grandmother who refused to hear anything from Paul (except 1 Cor. 13) because of the way slave masters used Paul’s writings.
208 Powery, Dem Dry Bones 125.
209 Ibid. 125.
leads people out of slavery in Egypt, leads those who have died too young—indeed God leads all who’ve died—to new life. This pairing is both an embellishment and a missional call. It implicitly asks, why did Lazarus die? What oppressive and neglectful forces were involved? How are they similar to the experience of Hebrew slaves in Egypt? How are they similar to oppressive and neglectful forces in my life? At the same time, it invites the hearer/singer to imagine standing “on the rock where Moses stood,” to envision the time when “this old world’s gonna reel and rock,” to seek to lead God’s children through to a day when (all) Pharaoh’s army gets drowned.

Powery says this way of reading and preaching the text is not about “imprisoning one’s homiletical and hermeneutical imagination within a text but freeing it to see and hear the gospel message unleashed in the world.” What he doesn’t say is that this approach works because “gospel” is not limited to four books in the New Testament or subsumed in what God has done in Jesus. Rather, gospel is present every place in the text and in the world where God responds to human need with liberation and hope. Such a hermeneutic not only reframes how one thinks about God and gospel. It encourages an expansive, imaginative, and open way of reading that is inter-testamental and trans-contextual. It proclaims that one text can help us to understand another, and one’s

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210 Powery, Dem Dry Bones 126.
211 For more on a transcontextual approach see Eunjoo Kim, Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999). Here Kim asserts that preachers should focus upon the “interwovenness of the context between the local and the global” (16). Her “transcontextual” approach “demands that the preacher read and interpret the text with others from various social points of reference” (66). Kim offers here a homiletic that invites listeners to become agents of change (64), is “sensitive to power dynamics among different readers” (80), and leads hearers to share others’ suffering and pain while envisioning a common future (109).
human experience—whether it’s from monarchical, post-exilic, antebellum, or modern times—can bring insight to another human experience. Importantly, this help is not unidirectional, and if one voice is favored over others it is the marginalized or oppressed voice.

Powery’s work on the spirituals and Ezekiel 37 presents a hermeneutic of midrashic musicality that can help preachers better interpret and proclaim the Old Testament. Musicality is attentive to imaginative, poetic rhetoric that helps render the liberating God present. The midrashic nature of black, spiritual proclamation encourages expansive and open engagement with multiple perspectives that reimagine dominant readings of the Bible in a way that is responsive to human need. Thus, as the preaching of the spirituals demonstrates, those who employ the hermeneutic of midrashic musicality are more likely to interpret and proclaim Old Testament texts.

5.3.2. Experience of Otherness
A second hermeneutic approach that can help preachers better engage the Old Testament can be found in Lisa Thompson’s recent work on Womanist Preaching. Here Thompson reflects on the experience of black women preachers who are regularly othered by society and by the Church, even the black Church. In some ways, Thompson echoes the perspective seen in Alexander Deeg’s work on the Old Testament: otherness can function in beneficial ways. It can help the congregation see what it would otherwise miss. It can unsettle the traditions that are comfortable marginalizing people. Thompson provides a womanist homiletic to call her readers to listen carefully to

213 But not othering.
the voices of others, especially to the voices of black women.\footnote{Thompson writes, “I invite you to a posture of listening in momentary silence. If you are struggling to find yourself on the page or locate your story, refrain from the urge to insert yourself and your primary needs upfront. Chime in, interrogate, and probe for relevance only after you can articulate an understanding of what has been stated. If you attempt to assert your needs too quickly you may miss the opportunity present or the real texture of the conversation taking place” (Thompson xiv).} Still, Thompson pushes further than Deeg. She seeks to move congregations out of their traditions of othering and into a new life that welcomes and values those who were once pushed to the margins. While Deeg invites Christian preachers to imagine a Jewish presence in worship, Thompson calls the congregation to recognize how they are othering black women in their midst. As such, her approach to undoing othering expands and concretely applies the insights already gained from Deeg’s work. In what follows I will highlight key aspects of Thompson’s work, and then reflect on how it can provide important perspectives for furthering the preaching of the Old Testament.

One of Thompson’s major premises is that “those we have most excluded from the conversation, by deeming them as the \textit{other} or \textit{outsider}, must set the terms for our rules of engagement.”\footnote{Ibid. 7.} She’s speaking here specifically about privileging black women and their preaching as a way to understand and expand homiletics. Negatively, Thompson observes that the exclusion of black women, and the centering of cisgender male (and especially white, male) preaching, fosters a stagnant, oppressive, boring homiletic. She observes, “When preaching and its hopes are conflated with the presence or absence of a particular body, that body inherently restricts the possibility of preaching. Preaching becomes an unimaginative practice.”\footnote{Ibid. 15-6.} Positively, Thompson asserts that in attending to
black women and their preaching, one is exposed to another who has been othered and thus must respond creatively. She asserts,

Women, who preach within these [cis-male centric] traditions, constantly imagine and invent their sermons in conversation with and in juxtaposition to the tradition and its inherent power in a community; this requires both creativity and ingenuity for the sake of (re)imagining both the sermon and preaching.217

Because of their situation of marginalization, black women preachers have to be more innovating in their approach to preaching. As Thompson sees it, black women riff on the expectations of preaching,218 disrupt male-centric faith practices,219 renovate religious traditions,220 invent new ways of preaching,221 compete with established images,222 and broaden “understandings of the pulpit and of preaching within a community.”223 In short, they demonstrate and develop ingenuity.224

217 Thompson 17-8.
218 “Black preaching women riff off of the expectations of preaching and its ephemeral scaffolding…” (Thompson 18).
219 They necessarily disrupt “faith practices that are overwhelmingly male preferential” (Thompson 18).
220 Thompson 18, citing Teressa Fry Brown’s concept of womanist renovation that includes “a fresh reading of the text,” “relentlessly engaging injustices,” articulating standards of justice, and carving out her own space (Teressa Fry Brown “An African American Woman’s Perspective: Rennovating Sorrow’s Kitchen,” in Preaching Justice, Christine Smith, ed. (Minneapolis: Wipe & Stock, 1998). With regard to preaching the Old Testament, Brown helpfully asserts, “‘Sorrow’s kitchen’ must be renovated within any church and within any society that would oppress any segment of the community” (Brown, “An African American Woman’s Perspective” 45). While Brown writes here explicitly about the experience of African American women, her approach could equally apply to the ways in which the church and American society have marginalized Jews and the Jewishness of scripture. Indeed here too Christians must renovate sorrow’s kitchen.
221 Thompson 19-20.
222 “Black woman are competing with an established image when they preach; the ideal image, in its maleness, is inherently other than who black women are. Thus, black women are potentially still viewed outside the category of preacher” (Thompson 32).
223 Thompson 21.
224 This ingenuity can also help in the development of Old Testament homiletics where, because of the othering of the text, preachers must riff (on expectations for a gospel
Part of these ingenious approaches to preaching that black women embody involve the use of language and voice. Here Thompson notes, “‘Voice has value.’ Most congregations allow certain voices to speak and have formational privilege within the community.”225 Of course, not frequently enough is this privileged voice a black woman’s. “Therefore, a tactical use of the power and authority of voice by those whose voices are marginalized (i.e., women in contested spaces or LGBTQIA+ individuals in heterosexist spaces) is for the preacher to use already established credible and authoritative voices in the community.”226 Using this existing communal language to help people hear marginalized voices involves “pushing the community beyond itself.”227 It entails, says Thompson, paying attention to the sources one includes in their sermons. A womanist preacher, for instance, might include grandma and mama as “cultural prophets and poets” who are wisdom bearers as much as Marvin Gaye or Martin Luther King, Jr.228 So too, one wishing to foster preaching the Old Testament would bring in Old

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225 Thompson 58.
226 Thompson 58. Thompson continues to speak here about womanist preaching, but her impetus can aid Old Testament preaching as well. For instance, she advises asking, Who are the significant people and symbols within the congregation? What are the idioms that the community sees as authoritative? (57). Then, a womanist preacher (or one who wants to strengthen the preaching of the Old Testament) might ask, How can these people, symbols, and idioms be employed to “bolster” their own perspective, voice, and authority? (58). Part of the goal here is to find common ground with the congregation from which to build, subvert, and transform existing understandings about preaching. 227 Thompson 59.
228 Thompson 50. Thompson asserts further that a womanist homiletic might also engage in “riffing off the tradition to create something similar to, yet different from, the recognized tradition” (59). The use of play (95), a “disposition of openness,” and the joy
Testament figures as wisdom bearers—even, and especially, in New Testament sermons. As Thompson asserts, these “transgressing preaching practices” benefit black women preachers—but not only black women—for they also have “implications for the welfare of the community writ large.” They break down barriers, bring joy, expand understanding, and foster a fresh sense of tradition and scripture.

With regard to the interpretation of scripture, Thompson holds that a womanist homiletic knows logically and somatically, “There is not one meaning of scripture; we derive meanings in interaction with scripture.” Thus a womanist preacher seeks to lead their hearer to a fresh interaction with the text. She narrates lived experience by scripture rather than simply out of scripture. Here Thompson promotes a meticulous engagement of discovery modeled in the pulpit can also help the congregation to hear and receive different voices (65).

Thompson 47.

Ibid. 66.

This means that scriptures are kept and used rather than tossed aside. Thompson asserts, “the preacher does not discard the text in preaching, even those texts that are difficult; instead she builds upon present assumptions about interpretative practices for her own purposes” (67). It is easy to see here how this advice could also bolster Old Testament preaching practices. With this hermeneutic even Phyllis Tribble’s Old Testament “Texts of Terror” are to be kept and engaged. Thompson advises further that the preacher narrate lived experience “by scripture” rather than “out of scripture” (70). She wants preaching to help hearers realize that scripture speaks about black women’s lives and about the human experience as a whole. Here too, Thompson’s womanist homiletic helps with preaching the Old Testament, for it insists that scripture is not something distant and aloof that can only be sifted through and applied by a skillful interpreter. Still, Thompson’s approach does allow for preaching against a text. However, such preaching is to be treated as an act that can lead hearers to a fresh encounter with a text. Thus, Thompson advises that one preach against a passage of scripture only when “a text cannot be a word from the Lord that means something for me today” (68). Importantly, Thompson speaks here about a text that cannot be a word today for black women and/or for the community at large. This is a hermeneutic that intentionally considers the marginalization and oppression of others. She adds further that any preaching against the text should “build upon that which already resonates with listeners” (68) and be done “without undermining the authority of the text” (80).
with the biblical text that pays attention to the gaps in the text (the white fire) and amplifies the details in the text that might be overlooked (black fire). Again, her homiletic sounds a bit like Deeg’s approach. Thompson writes, “meticulous engagement might involve coloring-in the story of scripture by attending to missing details and the often overlooked” or it might include “highlighting and turning up the volume on what might seem like a small or obscure detail.” With both these approaches the goal is to show that a text once thought irrelevant or obscure speaks in specific ways that can powerfully connect with contemporary hearers.

Another suggested approach for helping hearers have a fresh interaction with scripture involves centering women from scripture. For instance, Thompson suggests preaching that recasts the stories of “Delilah and Samson, Bat-Jephthah (Jephthah’s daughter), the unnamed dismembered woman of Judges 19, Queen Vashti, and young Hadassah who was groomed to become Queen Esther.” In her book, Womanist Midrash, Wil Gafney features dozens of women from Eve to the last queen mother—named and unnamed—who are written about in the Torah and in the historical books of the Old Testament. In fact, a striking number of the biblical stories about women are found within the Old Testament, though, of course, not exclusively so.

Encountering these stories about biblical women, like engaging any of the womanist hermeneutics Thompson suggests, necessarily involves leading hearers to an encounter with otherness and toward a reflective accounting for the othering of black women (along with LGBTQIA+ and others depending on the congregation). For

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232 Thompson 74.
233 Ibid. 86.
preachers this means pushing on their own boundaries.\textsuperscript{234} Thompson asserts, “the preacher must make every attempt to experience the otherness of the text also—the ways it might ‘push back’ against our experience or how our experiences might ‘push back’ against the text.”\textsuperscript{235} This advice works as well for womanist preaching as it does for Old Testament preaching. Here Thompson advises preachers to recognize that the voice and perspective of the text may be quite different from their own, to be intentional about opening oneself to this voice and perspective, and to honestly and humbly reflect upon this encounter with the scriptural other.

With this kind of preparation, the preacher is better able to facilitate an experience of the otherness of the text for the hearers of the sermon. Thompson wants preachers to help hearers pay attention to “whose life is or is not at stake”\textsuperscript{236} in our homiletical theology. A womanist way of preaching should pursue a “communal-assertive” framework that makes preaching “answerable to those who are the least thriving members of a community.”\textsuperscript{237} In this way congregants are led to consider the otherness of the text through the perspective of those who are being othered in the contemporary church and world. The hope with this reframing and reconstructing way of preaching is “not only to recover ignored and dispossessed voices but also to make space for their full

\textsuperscript{234} Thompson advises a preaching strategy of (1) finding “points of resonation between text and life,” (2) moving “beyond memory to immediate encounter,” (3) “embodying the text,” and (4) engaging “scripture as a sensory encounter” (Thompson 87).
\textsuperscript{235} Thompson 88.
\textsuperscript{236} “We are willing to probe a text with deeper questions when there is a vested interest or something at stake. The problem lies in where we have drawn lines in the communal sands about who’s life is or is not at stake, or for whom these questions are worth pursuing and for whom they are not” (Thompson 98).
\textsuperscript{237} Thompson 124.
inclusion."²³⁸ Importantly, for Thompson full inclusion is not simply about certain people participating in the life of the Church. Rather, full inclusion entails a transformed theological outlook that includes those whom the Church and the world have othered in “the ways in which the divine is seen, manifests, and participates in the daily life world of all members of the community.”²³⁹ Indeed, such work is demanded for the sake of the lives of those “who live under the assault of being othered” and for “the life of their entire community.”²⁴⁰

Clearly, the kind of womanist homiletic that Thompson advocates is much needed for the improvement of preaching, for the full inclusion of black women’s lives and voices, and for the overall health of the community. Further, Thompson’s womanist homiletic offers important guidance for preaching the Old Testament and considering the Church’s relationship to Judaism. Her work suggests at least seven propositions for a hermeneutic that better enables Christian preaching of the Old Testament. Reflection on Thompson’s theses through the preaching of Donna Allen, Prathia Hall, Eboni Marshall Turman, Wil Gafney, and Melva Sampson among others illustrates the work that preachers of the Old Testament are called to do:

²³⁸ Thompson 140.
²³⁹ Ibid. 140.
²⁴⁰ “There is not partial inclusion or creation in the *kin-dom* of God. However, our means of *othering* constantly attempt to name some of us as partially or unequally created in the *imago Dei*—in the image of God. And this process wreaks havoc in the lives and on the literal bodies of persons in our midst. Those who live under the assault of being othered have a different demand placed upon their preaching ministries, as they search out the yet-to-be-made-possible. This demand requires nuanced risk-taking for the sake of their lives and ultimately the life of their entire community” (Thompson 176).
Read through and beyond traditional understandings of scriptural texts. Thompson asserts that preachers seek out common ground with the congregation from which to build, subvert, and transform existing understandings about Old Testament preaching. In her study of Prathia Hall’s preaching, Donna Allen finds that a successful womanist approach to the Old Testament “uses a familiar Bible story and offers an unfamiliar interpretation of the female character in order to challenge "the values that listeners traditionally bring to the text.”

For instance, Hall preaches:

Then came Mrs. Job. She is familiar to us. We have been beating up Mrs’ Job for as long as this story has been told. Perhaps we condemn her so vicariously because she reminds us so much of ourselves. But you won’t mind, will you, if this preacher has a word to say for Sister Job? Let us walk a mile in Mrs. Job’s shoes. Everything that Job lost, she lost. A woman had no property of her own. She had no identity of her own. She was the servant of her family—the servant of her husband…. [In calling for the cursing of God,] Sister Job did not regard God lightly. She knew that the living God would always vindicate the Holy Name. She took God very seriously. Sister Job was desperate because her hurt would not heal.

Notice here how Hall names traditional assumptions about Job’s wife (“Mrs. Job”), points to the congregation’s prejudice against her, but also notes their possible identification with her. Then Hall transforms the situation. Mrs. Job is now “Sister Job.” Her actions are not flippant and disrespecting but serious, rooted in faith, and arising from desperate suffering. In these ways Hall portrays the Old Testament as a vital, truth-telling, liberating word from God. Our own preaching of the Old Testament must meet the congregation where it is, which is often a place shaped by

241 Donna E. Allen, Toward a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Cannon, Alice Walker and Emancipatory Proclamation (New York: Peter Lang, 2013) 60.
centuries of Marcionite tendencies. Yet, it cannot leave the congregation with these traditional (heretical) understandings. Following Hall’s example, preachers must transform the situation of the Old Testament in the Christian imagination.

Approach the text with a disposition of play, openness, and joy in discovery to help the congregation hear and receive Old Testament voices. In another sermon, Prathia Hall preaches from Genesis 1 to engage the way this text has been used to marginalize women. Allen notes here that rather than simply denouncing such approaches or avoiding the text, Hall “uses humor as well as call and response to keep the audience engaged.”

Hall preaches,

So God created man in His own image. In the image of God, He created him—male and female—He created them. Does that say anything about messing up? Does it say anything about hierarchy and domination and subordination? Does it say anything about man being created first as the glory of God, and woman, a divine afterthought of the glory of man? So God created—created man in His own image. In the image of God, he created him male and female; He created them. That’s harmony, togetherness…Where did all of the order and the role business come from? Well, let’s take a closer look at this text that we just read.

Hall’s use of masculine language for God and humanity is striking here. Perhaps she is simply responding to the language of the text as read in the service. Another understanding of her preaching, however, would assert that she starts where her congregation is and uses play and open-ended questions to help her congregation discover and receive a different word from this text. Preaching the Old Testament well invites hearers to question what they thought they knew, make their own

243 Allen 62.
244 Ibid. 62.
discoveries in the text, and playfully imagine how these texts can open up new ways of faithfully living in the world.

*Highlight neglected Old Testament figures and marginalized Old Testament scriptures to increase congregational appreciation of the insights and authority of these figure/scriptures.* In a sermon preached at Duke Chapel, Eboni Marshall Turman invites the congregation into Hagar’s story.²⁴⁵ Turman locates Hagar in the desert—a slave facing gender, ethnic, and economic bias. She is a “poor woman of African descent.” Abraham, is portrayed as the “slaver,” yet also as the man chosen by God. In the text, Abraham has just sent Hagar and Ishmael away, per Sarah’s request. About this act, Turman observes, “Sometimes even God’s people are wrong—dead wrong—especially when it comes to race.” As Turman preaches, one hears a womanist Old Testament homiletic at work.²⁴⁶ It is clear that Hagar and Ishmael are problematic bodies for Abraham and Sarah. They are also problematic bodies for the Church—bodies that especially challenge an uncritical white, male, cis-gendered, heterosexual theology.

Yet, Turman lifts up Hagar as she looks for God’s intervention in scripture and the world. Hagar is part of a great run of God’s undoing of the evil of others (often so-called godly men). Here Turman lifts up exemplary scriptural women— the

widow at Zarephath, Esther, and Mary—who stand with Hagar as recipients of God’s gracious intervention. The examples of these women, and of what God did through them despite the oppression they experienced, punctuates the good news that Turman wants her congregation to hear: “God can take our worst and turn it into God’s best.” In this way, the congregation gains a new appreciation of the powerful witness of this neglected scripture about Hagar. As Turman demonstrates, using neglected Old Testament figures/texts provides ample opportunities for expanding the congregation’s knowledge and empathy.

**Look for the ways scripture can narrate human experience and engage it with meticulous attention to the text.** Thompson espouses a hermeneutic that pays attention to the white and black fire of the text, coloring in overlooked details and amplifying seemingly small details in an effort to demonstrate how the texts speaks of human life, and of black women’s lives specifically.247 One example of this hermeneutic at work can be seen in a sermon from Melva Sampson.248 Here Sampson amplifies a small detail in the book of Esther: the story begins when Queen Vashti said “no” to the drunken king’s inappropriate request (Esther 1:10-12). From this observation, Sampson colors in the story. She weaves together Vashti’s story with her own

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247 As noted above: “meticulous engagement might involve coloring-in the story of scripture by attending to missing details and the often overlooked” or it might include “highlighting and turning up the volume on what might seem like a small or obscure detail” (Thompson 74).

experience in “big momma’s” kitchen, where a spirit of righteous indignation is expressed with “Hell no!” Portraying Queen Vashti as a black matriarch, Sampson preaches:

Queen Vashti’s response is often overlooked for the more palatable story of Esther. Yet to gloss over this monumental moment of liberation is to miss the making of a model of leadership in which following the sound of the genuine within one’s self is paramount. Such a model moves us from the sin of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation to the virtues of self-acceptance and self-development. Vashti’s metaphorical response of “hell no!” became a model for all the women in Susa and a threat to those who would have found pleasure in her debasing display. The price she paid for dissing the king was dear—banishment. Yet, I imagine it was only a small price to pay for retrieving her voice, dignity, and self-worth. Vashti’s insistence on taking care of herself reveals to us that we too will be faced with life-altering decisions when we decide to honor our own divinity. Vashti’s actions and the king’s response are telltale signs that we, too, will have to choose between revolution and apathy, between objectification and humanization, and between the inevitability of pain and the option of misery.

Sampson’s preaching here engages in an imaginative and detailed reflection on the text as that which speaks of and speaks to the challenges of human life, and (perhaps) especially black women’s lives. Proclaiming the book of Esther in this way shows how a seemingly old text about the abuses of an ancient monarchy speak powerfully to life today. Sampson demonstrates that the Old Testament is well-suited to offer real-talk about human experience and othering. Preaching the Old

249 Around my big momma’s kitchen table, where green beans were snapped and the daily rumor mill was spun, the phrase ‘Hell no!’ Signaled an emphatic refusal used to express discontent toward a person, place, or thing….in Nez’s kitchen, as we affectionately called it, “Hell no!” Was a saying of righteous indignation…When I read Vashti’s story, I think of Nez, who, if she had been with Vashti after hearing the king’s request, surely would have looked at the queen and given her the royal nod to repeat after her and say, “Hell no!”… (Sampson 27-8).

250 Sampson 28-9.
Testament well, then, does not shy away from the way the text narrates suffering and marginalization.

_When necessary, argue against an Old Testament text—but only as a way of freshly engaging it._ Thompson recognizes that sometimes we must wrestle against scripture. However, her concern is that such wrestling build upon “that which already resonates with listeners”\(^{251}\) in the text and beyond. And, she advises that any arguing with the text be done “without undermining the authority of the text.”\(^{252}\) To illustrate what she means, Thompson highlights a sermon from a woman named Vicki who preached about the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:19-20. She preaches:

> Just like our sister Tamar, we have a tendency to devalue our existence by keeping silent about childhood sexual abuses we have suffered, in order to avoid exposing our families to public humiliation. As African Americans we place greater value on the opinions of those we love as an entity, as opposed to the individuals who constitute our ‘skin and kin.’…Tamar lived in patriarchal times and within a situation of life far different from our lives today. Our response to sexual violence within our family does not have to be the same as hers.\(^{253}\)

This sermon, entitled “The Silence We keep,” highlights the problematic nature of 2 Samuel 13, but it does so by connecting with the problematic ways Church and family address sexual abuse. By naming Tamar as a member of the congregation—“Sister Tamar”—the preacher transforms her arguing against the text into scripture’s arguing against a biblical hermeneutic that “marginalizes women or reinforces

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\(^{251}\) Thompson 68.

\(^{252}\) Ibid. 80.

\(^{253}\) Ibid. 81-2. Neither the preacher nor the location of the sermon are fully identified.
patriarchal teachings of the text.”254 As Donna Allen asserts, this kind arguing makes for a praxis that is “a potentially empowering, liberating, and motivating force for unity and revitalization within the Black community, as well as for other oppressed peoples.”255 Note, for instance, that preaching against the text in this way also liberates this Old Testament passage from being marginalized as simply an archaic “text of terror.”256

Read the text with an eye to how it leads hearers to an encounter with otherness and toward a reflective accounting for the othering of human beings. For instance, a Christian preacher might read the Old Testament through the experience of Jews. Of course, Thompson holds that preachers should read scripture through the lens of black women and the experience of LGBTQIA+ people. This queering way of reading pushes on boundaries that open up new hearings for, especially Old Testament scriptures. In a sermon from 1 Samuel 8:4-18 entitled, “Give us a Man-King,” Wil Gafney builds off of the assertion in the text that the people’s request for a king is a rejection of God (1 Sam 8:7).257 From this perspective she leads her hearers to encounter the otherness of God and to wrestle with how the church has engaged in othering people. She preaches:

254 Allen 81.
255 Ibid. 81-82.
God transcends all of our language, petty ambitions, and self-aggrandizing titles. We need new language for God that is not rooted in vengeance and violence, submission and slaughter, or domination and damnation. We need to employ a little sanctified imagination and call God by names that don’t bring her down to our level. But all we have is these human tongues and colonized imaginations. Drawing on the spirit of my ancestors I will say God is a mother to the motherless and a father to the fatherless. God is a doctor in the sickroom and a lawyer in the courtroom. God is the one who brings us to life, calls us to freedom, and moves between us with love.

God is:
Sovereign, Savior and Shelter;
Author, Word and Translator;
Earth-Maker, Pain-Bearer and Life-Giver;
Holy Incarnate Majesty, Holy Incarnate Word, Holy Abiding Spirit;
Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer;
The God of Isaiah, the God of Jesus and our God;
Parent, Partner, and Friend.

God is:
shepherd, banner, rock, fortress, deliverer,
peace, light, salvation,
strength and shield,
devouring fire,
abiding presence.

God is twelve and seven and three and one and legion. God is. And God is available to any and every one whether warrior, prophet, king, laborer, immigrant, transchild, felon, politician, trafficked woman, president, pastor, professor or seminarian, patriarchal misogynist or white supremacist, once we understand that the titles with which we have crowned ourselves and in which we name God in our image become idols. And one day if we are not careful, God will leave us to them.258

Donna Allen names as an emancipatory praxis of womanist preaching, “The dismantling of heterosexism and homophobic inclusive of an affirmation of the diversity of human sexuality.”259 Gafney’s sermon participates in this work by challenging martial and patriarchal constructions of God. In doing this work, Gafney

258 Gafney, “Give Us A Man-King.”
259 Allen 82.
shows that this Old Testament text addresses far more than the historically distant Israelite monarchy or the classic, colonial American propaganda against the king of England. This scripture speaks to vital matters of faith such as the very nature of God and the way in which humans conceive of their identity in relation to God and each other. Thus, a key strategy for preaching the Old Testament well involves using these texts to name and dismantle othering within the text and in the way the Church has used texts to other marginalized bodies.

Pay attention to “whose life is or is not at stake” in the interpretation of scripture. As Thompson writes, a womanist way of preaching makes preaching “answerable to those who are the least thriving members of a community.” This commitment to caring for the lives of those who are least thriving leads her to counsel her readers into “a posture of listening” that refrains “from the urge to insert yourself” too quickly. In another sermon on Exodus 17, Will Gafney preaches (first) about the thirst of Hebrews in the wilderness and migrants in the desert before ever allowing her congregation to insert their own needs and perspectives. She preaches,

Thirst is maddening. It makes people desperate. Out of desperation sailors stranded at sea will drink salt water they know will make them ill—maybe even kill them—because they are desperately thirsty. Immigrants coming to this country for life and opportunity for themselves and their children, tracking through the desert, often die of thirst. Some die in quarrels fighting over the last little bit of liquids, including sometimes the body’s own waste water. And when

260 “We are willing to probe a text with deeper questions when there is a vested interest or something at stake. The problem lies in where we have drawn lines in the communal sands about who’s life is or is not at stake, or for whom these questions are worth pursuing and for whom they are not” (Thompson 98).
261 Ibid. 124.
262 Ibid. xiv.
good souls—good, faithful, loving souls—leave water in the desert for them. Boarder Patrol pours it out into the sand where it fades away without ever nourishing a life.

Today, we have the story of another group of migrants. They have just started out on their trek. In the previous chapter they had had some kind of feast: chickens of the desert and biscuits from heaven. But roast quail can be salty, and bread—even if it did come from heaven—can be dry, and so the people were thirsty. And, Moses didn’t have any water to give them. He was their leader, or was he? Moses and Miriam, his sister prophet, were on this journey together.263

By considering immigrants and asylum seekers endangered at the U.S. border and comparing them to Hebrew migrants in the desert whom God is leading, Gafney embodies a hermeneutic that considers the least thriving members of the community. While the congregation may not immediately find themselves “on the page” or be able to locate their “story” in this scripture,264 Gafney’s hermeneutic leads the congregation into a “posture of listening” with fresh ears and paying close attention to what Exodus 17 may declare in this moment. Her preaching shows that good Old Testament preaching does not assume that the text will speak to the immediate experience of every hearer. Rather, the text calls us to hear, consider, and respond to those who have been—and are being—othered in the world.

Centering the experience of those who are being othered connects the preacher with hermeneutical practices that support the most vulnerable in the congregation and community. It also encourages helpful approaches to preaching the Old Testament—as

264 See again Thompson xiv.
demonstrated by the seven proposals based on Thompson’s work. Perhaps this is because
the Old Testament itself is often othered in Christian congregations. Or, perhaps it is
because much of the Old Testament is written by and for people struggling against
marginalization and oppression. Even the four, short Servant Songs address those who
suffer othering. Thompson’s approach to womanist preaching shows convincingly that
when preachers center the experience of those who suffer from being othered, they are
more likely to read the Old Testament, and they are better equipped to preach it well.

5.4. Concluding Reflections on Preaching in the Presence of Domination

These case studies in African American preaching of the Old Testament have
shown that there is a strong correlation between frequent preaching of the Old Testament
and the ways in which black preaching speaks about God, interprets scripture, and
proclaims the good news. Allen Callahan’s discussion of the history of African
Americans and the Bible shows a construal of the gospel that features the Old Testament
prominently as a response to contexts of domination. Exodus proclaims that God
liberates. Exile shows God fostering resistance and working for change. Ethiopia
articulates God valuing of black individuals and African cultures. Emmanuel portrays
God as joining in the human experience of suffering while connecting humans with
divine vindication.

For instance, the preacher uses the servant trope to offer a mantra of grace to those
who experience social ostracization: “The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been
disgraced…I know that I shall not be put to shame; the one who vindicates me is near”
(Isa 50:7-8a). Later the preacher uses the servant figure to speak to those who experience
marginalization based on their appearance. “Just as there were many who were astonished
at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond
that of mortals—so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of
him; (52:14-15).
A theology with different notes of emphasis grows out of this preaching history. Cleo LaRue highlights the Sovereign, Creator God as one who acts mightily and immanently, empowers truth-telling, and liberates the oppressed. James Forbes argues that Spirit-led preaching resembles the prophetic witness, relying on God to transform words into deeds of liberation. Luke Powery asserts that Spirit-led preaching laments suffering, celebrates God’s deliverance, describes God’s hopeful help, brings people together, and sends them out to pursue justice.

Powery also articulates an important musical midrashic hermeneutic within black preaching. This hermeneutic is attentive to imaginative and poetic rhetoric, renders the liberating God present, encourages expansive and open engagement with multiple perspectives on scripture, and reimagines dominant readings of the Bible in a way that is responsive to human need. Lisa Thompson’s work offers a seven-fold Old Testament hermeneutic that centers the experience of those who suffer othering and supports the most vulnerable in the community.

That Second Isaiah similarly engages in these ways of naming God, interpreting scripture, and announcing good news only underscores how ancient and powerful these hermeneutic and homiletic approaches are. Of course, the African American preaching featured in this chapter not only echoes Second Isaiah’s preaching, it adapts and expands upon it. The suffering servant shows us God’s liberation and embodies the Spirit. Black preaching does this and gives suffering human beings a framework for understanding the God who is with them in their suffering. While the Servant Songs sound like preaching and poetry, the music of the spirituals, like the musicality of black preaching, does more than preach or wax poetic. It makes manifest the presence of God and opens up
interpretation to multiple voices and perspectives in a way that words on a page can only gesture toward. Second Isaiah may proclaim justice and relief from suffering, but the black preaching featured in this chapter holds a consistent focus on liberation from forces of systemic oppression in multiple forms. Like Second Isaiah, it names colonialist and imperial oppression that creates the injustices of exile and marginalization. However, the black preaching studied here also engages theology, hermeneutics, and gospel construals to speak more directly to the injustice experienced by immigrants at the U.S. border, the marginalization of black women, the oppression of LGBTQIA+ people, and the need for climate justice. These expansive ways of preaching show, at least, that one need not live in ancient Babylonia nor personally experience oppression to faithfully and effectively preach the Old Testament in contemporary Christian congregations. Perhaps, what is needed alongside Old Testament friendly theology, hermeneutics, and gospel construals is simply empathy for the experience of other human beings and a commitment to pursuing God’s justice in the world.

Finally, it should be stated again that this chapter can only offer selected case studies. There is need for more research to be done on black hermeneutics and homiletics for Old Testament preaching. My hope is that this chapter will advance the conversation and encourage other scholars to weigh in on what is already present, but largely unrecognized, within the “ether” of African American preaching traditions, not to mention other traditions where the Old Testament features prominently.
6. Concluding Reflections

When Dale Andrews suggested a constructive approach to practical theology in the Black Church, he turned to the preaching of Second Isaiah. Preachers, he said, should learn from the preaching of this ancient prophet. With this call Andrews is asking for more than a simple repetition of select biblical phrases, culled homiletic themes, or set poetic forms. Rather, Andrews’ turn to Second Isaiah calls for preaching that hears scripture speaking afresh in contemporary contexts, attends to suffering, works for justice, leads to liberation, and builds a caring community that centers around a faithful, covenantal God.

In many ways, this dissertation can be understood as an extended reflection upon the potential insights and impact of Andrews’ advice for contemporary preachers. It asks, what happens when we learn preaching from Second Isaiah? What does this particular prophetic tutor teach us about preaching—and especially about preaching the Old Testament? How might the homiletical witness of the four Servant Songs be a root for our own preaching of ancient texts? In what ways should the witnesses of rabbinic and contemporary Jews, as Servant Israel, shape our proclamation? Where are the places that hermeneutics and homiletics need to reform in response to the suffering-servant witnesses of African American preachers during centuries of enslavement and marginalization?

These questions highlight perspectives that guide a Second Isaian approach to preaching. The voices and texts examined here have helped to break down harmful binaries of old and new, black and white, male and female, Jew and gentile. They have
highlighted the use of “Old Testament” as an anti-Marcionite tool that testifies to God speaking and acting for good. Yet, they do not shy away from grief and the requisite response. By singing and suffering with the servant, these voices join the Songs themselves in offering hermeneutics that heal the marginalized and presenting preaching that transforms contexts of domination. This study points to at least ten theses for preaching from and with the Old Testament.

From the survey of literature about preaching the Old Testament in Chapter 2:

1. The Old Testament should be read as preaching.

   Elizabeth Achtemeier invites preachers to understand the development of the Old Testament as the product(s) of preaching. As she claims, the Old Testament not only offers proclamations about God’s identity and communal impact, it also develops through on-going interpretations of earlier Old Testament texts that are reframed in light the preacher’s present circumstances. With this move Achtemeier portrays the Old Testament as a correlative genre to contemporary preaching. This move cuts against the tendency to distance the Old Testament from contemporary Christian preaching. As Achtemeier asserts, these texts may be ancient, but they can hardly be foreign to the preacher.

   Further, Walter Kaiser, Jr., calls preachers to value the Old Testament’s unique theological and ethical contributions. He also advocates for discerning the author’s intention and meaning within historical context. Kaiser—at his best—invites preachers to attend to Old Testament texts as voices proclaiming a particular, contextual word that should be heard in its own right. Where Achtemeier argues that the genre of the Old Testament is similar to preaching, Kaiser holds that the content of the Old Testament
preaches. Thus, these old scriptures not only spoke once, but continue to speak into contexts of faith today.

2. The Old Testament is a rich resource for contemporary modes of preaching.

John Holbert applies the inductive/narrative approach to Old Testament texts, demonstrating that Old Testament narratives can be especially well suited to invite and initiate hearers into God’s strange and transformative ways in the world today. By demonstrating that the Old Testament’s narratives function well within a once dominant and still widely used homiletical form, Holbert shows that the Old Testament is far from being too challenging or too archaic. Rather the Old Testament can be a rich resource for contemporary styles of preaching.

Though she does not set out to do so, Ellen Davis furthers Holbert’s argument in many ways. Davis demonstrates that the Psalms—a collection of non-narrative Old Testament texts—can be preached regularly and powerfully today. She also develops a clear connection between poetic modes of preaching and the particular way in which the Old Testament often speaks. Finally, Davis highlights how many contemporary Church liturgies already draw significantly from the Old Testament to proclaim words of prayer, praise, lament, and celebration. This intersection of liturgy, scriptural language, Psalms, and poetics—when combined with Holbert’s inductive narratology—go a long way to debunk the myth that the Old Testament is too difficult to preach today. Indeed, Holbert and Davis help to show that the Old Testament is ready-made for many of the most commonly used preaching forms today.

3. The Old Testament leads contemporary preachers to be more attentive to power dynamics.
Rein Bos draws attention to anti-semitism and power dynamics that have affected traditional Christian interpretation. He proposes an alternative that encourages preachers to recognize the Old Testament as voice proclaiming important theologies that would be lost to Christians if we only read the New Testament. He also asserts that the Old and New Testaments point beyond christological fulfillment to embodiment in the contemporary congregation (and in the contemporary synagogue). Further, Bos calls for Christians to grapple with the reality that the Old Testament is originally written for Jews and continues today to speak first to Jews. This observation leads Bos to refer to his own congregation as “members from the congregation of the gentiles.” These homiletical framings point to some ways in which Jews and Christians share in celebration and anticipation of God’s fulfillment of scriptural promises.

Walter Brueggemann blows up the false dualism of New Testament versus Old Testament, demonstrating that there are far too many voices and perspectives—often even within one biblical book—to reduce the conversation to a simple “either-or.” Brueggemann also highlights how Second Isaiah models preaching forms such as celebration and testimonial modes that empower testimony from the congregation. Finally, Brueggemann locates the roots of messianism within the royal imagination. Messianism, despite its potentially positive uses, can be co-opted easily as a theological tool for domination. Brueggemann and Bos portray the Old Testament as a call for preachers to appreciate the unique voice of the text, gauge power dynamics while navigating hermeneutical voices, attend to the impact of preaching within the historical context and contemporary communities, and—like Second Isaiah—empower the congregation’s own work and witness.
From the study in Chapter 3 of Second Isaiah’s homiletical use of the Servant Songs:

4. *The Old Testament itself provides a model for preaching older texts in new contexts.*

The four Servant Songs can helpfully instruct our own preaching of the Old Testament. Notably, these Songs do not pick up a mere preaching theme from older texts. They do not simply retell a story. They do not merely repeat a text, nor do they argue against it (fully). They do not search for a proof text or a promise that can be fulfilled in the moment. Rather, these Songs focus on the language of scripture as that which speaks into the present moment. They invite the congregation to stand in the shoes of another, older witness. These Songs use older texts to build a bridge for the congregation to envision a different future for themselves and the world. They testify in the voice of the tradition’s figure heads, inviting the congregation’s own testimony. They read older biblical texts through the lens of contemporary marginality and suffering. These Songs put texts in dialogue with each other and with the congregation in a way that does not allow ancient past, recent past, nor present to dominate the conversation. In short, these Songs, as a microcosm of the entire Old Testament, have much to teach preachers about how to proclaim old texts in new contexts. Thus, preachers would do well not only to exegete their message but to analyze their homiletical methods.

5. *The content of the Old Testament is a rich resource for combatting domination.*

Here the Songs show that the Exodus narrative is a constructive tool for fostering liberative action in response to systemic injustice. The Creation accounts counter marginalization and dehumanization. The Songs also draw upon traditions about the tribes of Jacob to foster collective action (gathering, raising, and restoring) that combats
economic domination. They use Lamentations as a tool for identifying God’s presence in the midst of suffering, effectively addressing the dysphoria caused by trauma/grief and the loss of cultural identity. They place Jeremiah and Leviticus in dialogue to model an openness that counters any one dominating theological worldview. With just these four Songs, Second Isaiah demonstrates how portions of the Torah, Kethuvim, and Nevi‘im offer important, transformative words in contexts of conflict and domination.

While movements today may point to the witness of Jesus as the primary guide to confronting injustice, it is important to note that the driving force of Jesus’ messages are also passages from the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets. The Greatest Commandment (Deuteronomy/Leviticus) and the Nazareth message of good news to the poor (Isaiah) illustrate well Jesus’ own use of the Old Testament as a rich resource for combatting domination. Christian preachers would do well to follow Christ’s example here.

From examination in Chapter 4 of Alexander Deeg’s work on listening and learning from Jewish hermeneutics:

6. The Old Testament is foreign, but beneficially so.

Deeg argues that the Old Testament leads Christians to consider their relation to scripture and to Jews. Christians are not Israel nor a modern Jewish body. The texts that Christians call Old Testament were not and are not written first for a Christian audience. In this way the Old Testament is foreign. At the same time, Deeg asserts that Christians have been made a part of the chosen people, Israel, through the work of Christ. Furthermore, one cannot even understand the New Testament or articulate anything about Christ without the Old Testament. Thus, Christianity cannot exist without the Old Testament and Christians must remain both outsiders and insiders when it comes to these
scriptures. In light of this standing, Deeg holds that the Old Testament calls Christian preachers to neither write off these texts as “old” nor co-opt the texts as if they were simply a tool for our own use. The Old Testament is beneficially foreign. It invites the preacher and congregation to recognize and wrestle with their own religio-cultural location as interpreters of these sacred texts.

7. *The language and imagery of the Old Testament are vital for the preaching moment.*

Deeg argues that good preaching begins by listening closely to the voice of another—in this case the voice of the Old Testament text. More than a mere call to attention, Deeg holds that the words and images of these Old Testament texts can be trusted to faithfully and effectively guide proclamation. Rabbinic imagination and meticulousness model deep and expansive proclamation that grow out of attending closely to the Old Testament’s language and imagery. As the Rabbis teach us, such work involves observing, questioning, interpreting, expecting, dialoging, interrupting, and being interrupted.

8. *Christian preaching can be messianic without being anti-Jewish.*

It is not only Deeg’s Lutheranism that holds to the belief that Christ is present, preaching in and through the words of the sermon. What this means for Old Testament preaching is that a sermon does not have to say “Jesus” in order to be Christian. So too, not every sermon that says, “Jesus, Jesus” is Christian. Here Deeg calls Christian preachers to repent of traditional, Christian theological anti-semitism and to discern a better way forward by taking Jewish presence and objection seriously. Since the Old Testament is first a Jewish text, Christian preachers should approach Old Testament preaching as if Jews were sitting in the congregation. This stance is not merely an effort
to ameliorate inter-faith conflict. Rather, as Deeg holds, considering Jewish presence and response to the messiah can help Christian theology and proclamation. For instance, messianic preaching that is aware of Jewish presence can help to form a Christian body that is part of an ongoing, politically acting, messiah-awaiting movement, open to God’s surprising interruption of time.

Finally, from reflection in Chapter 5 on the witnesses of African American preaching in the present and over the past several centuries:

9. *The Old Testament invites Christian preachers to engage the other two persons of the Trinity.*

The Old Testament naturally emphasizes God, the Sovereign Creator and Liberator. So too it speaks frequently of God, the Spirit. Cleo LaRue’s homiletical theology emphasizes the Sovereign God as one who acts mightily and immanently, empowers truth-telling, and liberates the oppressed. While black preaching may frequently turn to Jesus at the climatic moment of the sermon, LaRue holds that such a move works best when rooted in the Old Testament narrative theology about God’s creative, liberative work that is also demonstrated in the sending and resurrecting of Jesus.

James Forbes and Luke Powery emphasize the role of the Spirit in preaching as an outgrowth of Old Testament theology. Forbes holds that Spirit-led preaching resembles the prophetic witness. Powery draws heavily on Ezekiel 37 for the formation of his homiletical pneumatology. He asserts that Spirit-led preaching laments suffering, celebrates God’s deliverance, describes God’s hopeful help, brings people together, and sends them out to pursue justice. LaRue, Forbes, and Powery present together a call for
Old Testament preaching that, while it may name Jesus, absolutely must reflect upon and proclaim the work of the Spirit and the Sovereign God.

10. The Old Testament is good news, period. And, it is especially good news in contexts of suffering and oppression.

Allen Callahan’s discussion of the history of African Americans and the Bible shows a construal of the gospel that features the Old Testament prominently. *Exodus* proclaims that God liberates. *Exile* shows God fostering resistance and working for change. *Ethiopia* articulates God valuing black people and African cultures. *Emmanuel* portrays God as joining in the human experience of suffering while connecting humans with divine vindication. Callahan’s study demonstrates that the Old Testament is and has long been good news. Furthermore, reading the Old Testament faithfully requires one to expand good news beyond the four gospels. Or, said a different way, a close reading of the gospels recognizes the role of the Old Testament in shaping its articulation of good news, attention to justice and mercy, and work for oppressed peoples.

Lisa Thompson’s womanist homiletic centers the experience of those who suffer othering. She develops a seven-fold hermeneutic that can be used to show how the Old Testament supports the most vulnerable people in the community. Preaching these texts well follows the lead of the Old Testament by inviting attention to texts/people who are often marginalized by the Church, undoing traditional understandings of texts used for oppression, reflecting a disposition of play and discovery, narrating human experience powerfully and realistically, inviting hearers to push back on and even debate voices with which they disagree, leading the congregation to engage otherness, and focusing on whose lives are at stake in scripture and its proclamation. In these ways, Thompson’s
approach when combined with Callahan’s study demonstrates that the Old Testament can be especially good news for those who experience marginalization. Indeed, one cannot preach the Old Testament faithfully without engaging contexts of oppression.

Finally, like the Songs themselves, the perspectives in this dissertation raise questions for further dialogue. For instance, they lead us to ask whether it is helpful, or even necessary, to distinguish between Old Testament and New Testament preaching. I have continued to make such a distinction out of concern for navigating the different power dynamics involved when a Christian preacher draws from texts held in common with Jews. In my mind, this is the primary difference between New Testament and Old Testament as scripture in the Church. And yet, such distinctions participate in a binary that has proven harmful for Jewish-Christian relations and even for Christian use of these scriptures. Perhaps there will come a day when we can simply speak of scriptural preaching. This dissertation suggests several markers for what that day would look like, but there are surely other conditions that need to be met before our language can reflect this theological and homiletic transformation. Such conditions need to be named by more than just this author, but by those who are most directly impacted by our preaching of Old Testament texts.

This leads to a second area for further dialogue. The Songs of Second Isaiah along with the voices examined this dissertation raise questions about whose voices and experiences are still needed to further expand our understanding of preaching with the Suffering Servant? There was only space here to examine in depth the perspectives of two important interlocutors. Jewish and African American approaches to preaching are, perhaps the most constructive for a study about Old Testament preaching. In fact, there is
more to be examined here in both of these approaches. And, a study that moved beyond Jewish-Christian dialogue to a focused, Jewish Studies approach might prove especially insightful. Furthermore, in a few places within this dissertation I was able to refer to sermons and insights from LGBTQIA+, Latinx, African, and Asian voices. The brief encounters with these preachers and scholars suggest that further study would lead to new insights, new construals of scripture, and new ways of de-centering white, cis-gendered, patriarchal colonialism. All this would aid Old Testament preaching. So, let us endeavor to continue this dialogue. And, let us join in this dialogue’s on-going harmony and cacophony with the hopeful, transformative mantra that Second Isaiah preaches to us:

Morning by morning

the Lord God wakens—

wakens my ear to listen.
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Biography

David Stark earned a Bachelor of Arts in Bible and Christian Ministry from Anderson University, Anderson, Indiana (1999), a Master of Divinity from Duke University Divinity School (2002), and a Master of Arts in Hebrew Bible from Boston College (2005). An ordained Elder in the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, he has served both rural (Shiloh UMC) and urban (Highland UMC) congregations. He has taught as a visiting scholar at Universität Leipzig, Germany and as a Teaching Fellow for the Styberg Preaching Institute at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Stark has published, “New Approaches to Old Testament Preaching” in *Homiletic* Vol. 43.2 (2018), “Homiletical Squib: Preaching Politics” in the *International Journal of Homiletics* Vol. 2.1 (2017), and “‘Lo! for us the wilds are glad’: Charles Wesley’s Proclamation of Isaiah” in the *Wesley Theological Journal* Vol 51.2 (2016). He has received the Styberg Teaching Fellowship at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, an Erasmus+ grant for study at Universität Leipzig, the Duke University Doctoral Fellowship, a Fellowship for the Study of Professional Ethics in Berlin, Germany and Auschwitz, Poland, the Boston College Doctoral Fellowship, and a Pittulloch Foundation Fellowship for the Middle East Travel Seminar led by Dr. Max Miller and Dr. Gerry Mattingly. Currently, Stark teaches homiletics at the University of the South, School of Theology, and he serves as the English language editor for the *International Journal of Homiletics*. He lives in Sewanee, Tennessee with his wife, Sarah, and son, Elijah.