

Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Old Testament: A Lectionary Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007. 312 pages, \$29.95.

With this volume Ron Allen and Clark Williamson complete their superbly valuable lectionary commentary series designed to help remedy the anti-Jewish ethos that permeates the way Christians read the entire Bible: Gospels, Epistles, and Old Testament. The introduction to this new volume includes a not-to-be-missed analysis of the way the Revised Common Lectionary “leave[s] the door open” (xvi) for such anti-Jewish bias by its very structure and selection of Old Testament texts. Within a powerful interpretative tradition that has shaped the broad spectrum of Christian theology for most of our history, the Revised Common Lectionary does more than “leave the door open.” It sets preachers up for anti-Jewish interpretation. Consequently the remainder of the introduction serves the critical function of describing the deeply ingrained habits of anti-Jewish misreading that we will perpetuate unless we become sensitive to them and take deliberate steps to counter them, both in ourselves and in our listeners. It also lays out the alternative perspective on the Old Testament and Judaism that exegetes and theologians have been developing over the past half-century. Few Christians, for example, can hear in passage from the New Testament the rich resonances of First Testament stories and themes that serve as the infrastructure upon which the New Testament passages are built. This failure to hear them is the bad fruit of a widespread failure to preach on First Testament selections at all or to preach on them in a highly prejudicial way that emphasizes contrast rather than genetic heritage. Viewing the Old Testament simply as prologue to the New Testament, or construing Old Testament within a framework of imagined contrasts to anything Christian, such as “petty legalism” in contrast to Jesus’ freedom, are two global habits of Christian thinking that simply do not square with a nuanced reading of the varied and complex corpus of Old Testament writings, to say nothing of the kaleidoscope of Jewish interpretation to which it gave birth and of which Christian theology is one complex and shifting configuration contributing to that kaleidoscope. In the Introduction Allen and Williamson identify three ways the lectionary envisions connecting the selected Old Testament passages to New Testament passages, noting the strengths and weaknesses of such connections. They see “parallelism” as “the most theologically satisfactory” (xvii). “Contrast” is an especially pernicious connection implied by the very pairing of passages on the basis of some superficial detail, like the “outer darkness” of the parable of the Talents in Matthew 25 and the darkness of the Day of the Lord in Zephaniah 1:15 (Proper 28/Year A). “Typology” is the third possible Old Testament-New Testament connection set up by the lectionary. This tempts the preacher to perpetuate the view that only positive function of the Old Testament is to predict the coming of Jesus, thus strengthening the tradition that the Old Testament is both a positive and negative prologue to the New.

Allen and Williamson offer some broad suggestions for resisting and remedying this entire tradition of Old Testament interpretation. One approach would be to create an alternative lectionary that does not follow the Christian Year except for the major festivals of Christmas and Easter but reads and interprets the Old Testament and Judaism in a way that draws on current theologically sensitive and responsible Jewish and

Christian scholarship. Another approach would be to change either First Testament or Second Testament reading prescribed by the lectionary to a text that is more appropriate to a healthy theology. For example, when the Gospel is Lk 4:14-20, why not pair it with Isa. 61:1-2 and 58:6, which Jesus actually quotes, in place of Neh. 8? It would also help if preachers would preach a series of sermons based on the semicontinuous Old Testament readings designated as an option for the Sundays between Pentecost and Advent. On the Sundays after Easter, when no Old Testament passage is prescribed, the preacher could select one appropriate to one or more of the New Testament texts. Finally, and for some Christians scandalously, Allen and Williamson even suggest that there are passages from the New Testament that articulate or are habitually the occasion for poor theology and require an Old Testament remedy. They cite Dt. 4:1-2, 6-9 as such an antidote to toxic potential of Mk 7:1-23.

Altogether, this marvelous introduction lays out a framework for responsible interpretation of Old Testament texts. The commentaries on specific passages from the lectionary that follow help train the preacher to think within that framework. Coupled with the commentaries on the Gospel and Epistle selections in the previously published volumes, the entire set of commentaries will nurture preachers and congregations in new habits of hearing and understanding. For centuries the Christian Church has practiced old habits of thinking, Sunday after Sunday, even day after day. The only remedy for their toxic habits of thinking will be to encourage new habits, Sunday after Sunday, year after year. Many books have been produced and continue to be written to develop this new way of thinking about the Old Testament and Judaism. But unless preachers get trained in and practice and coach their congregations in these new ways, Christians will never learn them. Such training can only happen Sunday after Sunday, year after year. For that we need resources for doing that. This set of commentaries by Ron Allen and Clark Williamson are a unique resource. Preachers should consult them weekly!

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