

John C. Holbert. *Telling the Whole Story: Reading and Preaching the Old Testament Stories*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013. 206 pages. \$21.60.

In line with the excellent contributions John Holbert has made in the past which include *Preaching Old Testament: Proclamation & Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (1991) and *Holy Root, Holy Branches* (along with Ronald Allen, 1995), Holbert continues that tradition with this most recent volume. Holbert's purpose is to promote responsible story preaching. He believes such preaching, though not the only way to preach, brings about transformation in personal lives as well as in the world around us (viii-ix). The problem is that much story preaching is performed poorly. In addition, over the past several decades homileticians have identified major flaws with story sermons, which Holbert defines as a subgenre of the larger category of narrative preaching. So how can preachers capitalize on the power of biblical stories without falling victim to many of the ways story sermons are abused? Answering this question becomes one of his central purposes. Another purpose he maintains is "to deepen the insights that the Bible can yield to preachers in order that their preaching may take on the qualities of that deepened insight" (171). This book serves as a type of sequel to his 1991 book (x) but adds components that the publishers edited out in the earlier edition. He chose the texts he did in this volume because they are ones seldom heard (x).

In chapter one, Holbert traces the history of story preaching from the Bible through the post-reformation to the twentieth century, while giving attention to the disillusionments that many homileticians hold toward narrative sermons today. He maintains that the major criticisms leveled against story preaching are most persuasively and effectively argued in Richard Lischer's 1984 essay "The Limits of Story." Holbert uses this essay as a litmus test for crafting homiletically responsible story sermons.

Lischer identifies four substantive problems. First, is an aesthetic problem in which telling isolated stories often leads to moralizing sermons along the lines of Aesop's fables. The second problem is ontological. Too often the stories told are neat and organized and lead to nice well-rounded resolutions. In reality many people's lives do not identify with that scenario. The third is related to the story's theological dimension. It is difficult for a story to stand on its own without interpretation. In his sermons, Holbert shows how one can tell stories in a way that will enable them to be interpreted. He does this by subtly setting the interpretation within the story itself. The final issue Lischer raises with story is related to the socio-political realm. Stories often lack a prophetic voice. Holbert argues that Lischer's critique of story comes down to the misuse of story. When story is proclaimed responsibly it will avoid all these shortcomings. Holbert uses Lischer's four criticisms as a means of producing effective story sermons.

In chapter two, Holbert describes the tools necessary to produce story sermons. One is the ability and skill to read biblical narratives. The other is the ability to effectively tell a story. He concludes, "a story well read then leads to a story well told" (25). One must be trained in both skills. It is in describing how effectively to tell a story that he describes five types of story sermons (41-45).

Chapters three through six unpack four specific narrative stories in the Old Testament. These include Genesis 2:4b-3:24; the book of Jonah; 1 Samuel 15; and Judges 4. The sequence Holbert follows in each of these chapters is first to translate the text from Hebrew to English. Following the translating task he engages in a careful and detailed analysis of the story in the text, which he refers to as a narrative reading. This reading leads him to craft a plotted sermon story that includes explanatory notes along the way (no explanatory notes, however, are included

with his sermon on Judges 4). At the end of each sermon, Holbert critiques it in light of the four problems Lischer identified with the story sermon. Each time Holbert concludes that this particular sermon has avoided these pitfalls and thus the sermon represents a good story sermon. For example, Holbert believes his Jonah sermon passes Lischer's test. It avoids moralizing and is rooted in the story of God. The story is not "neat or closed" (130). Who really is the outsider is reversed. In the end it is Jonah. He is the only unrepentant one. This story is not a meaningless repetition of general theological truths.

Among the impressive qualities of this volume are the insights Holbert discovers as he engages in his careful narrative reading of the text. These insights alone are worth the read. He is not primarily interested in probing the historical background, but with the received text.

In turn, it would have been beneficial for Holbert to invite another reader who takes issue with story sermons, like Lischer, to also critique his sermons. In addition, I found it interesting that the title of chapter two is "Reading and Preaching the Old Testament Stories," which is also the subtitle of the book, when he argues elsewhere that his preferred title is the Hebrew Bible. But the title may simply be out of deference or an accommodation to popular understanding. He does default back to referring to it as the Hebrew Bible in the text of the volume.

One other minor observation is that the footnotes are placed at the bottom of each page, which I find most helpful. They are, however, in abbreviated form and the reader still needs to turn to the end of the book to find the full citations given in the bibliography.

Holbert combines the best of his areas of expertise in this volume, relying on both his training in Old Testament scholarship and in the discipline of homiletics. Hence, this book makes an important contribution for preachers and teachers of homiletics alike.

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