Editor's Foreword

Preparing beginning preachers to stand before the body of Christ and proclaim the word of God faithfully, authentically, and effectively Sunday after Sunday is and always has been a daunting responsibility. As North American pastors face pews filled with citizens of a postmodern, post-Christendom culture, this teaching task becomes even more complex. The theological, exegetical, and homiletical skills that preachers need for the future are as much in flux today as they have ever been in Western Christianity. Thus providing seminary students with a solid but flexible homiletical foundation at the start of their careers is a necessity.

Traditionally, professors of preaching choose a primary introductory textbook that presents a theology of proclamation and a process of sermon development and delivery from a single point of view. To maintain such a singular point of view is the sign of good writing, but it does at times cause problems for learning in pluralistic settings. One approach to preaching does not fit all. Yet a course simply surveying all of the homiletical possibilities available will not provide a foundation on which to build either.

Furthermore, while there are numerous introductory preaching textbooks from which to choose, most are written from the perspective of Euro-American males. Classes supplement this view with smaller homiletical texts written by women and persons of color. But a pedagogical hierarchy is nevertheless set up: the white male voice provides the main course and women and persons of color provide the side dishes.

Elements of Preaching is a series designed to help professors and students of preaching—including established preachers who want to develop their skills in specific areas—construct a sound homiletical foundation in a conversational manner. This conversation is meant to occur at two levels. First, the series as a whole deals with basic components found in most introductory preaching classes: theology of proclamation, homiletical contexts, biblical interpretation, sermonic claim, language and imagery, rhetorical form, delivery, and worship.

But each element is presented by a different scholar, all of whom represent diversity in terms of gender, theological traditions (Baptist, Disciple of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Methodist), and ethnicity (African American, Asian American, and Euro-American). Instead of bringing in different voices at the margin of the preaching class, Elements of Preaching creates a conversation around the central topics of an introductory course without foregoing essential instruction concerning sermon construction and embodiment. Indeed, this level of conversation is extended beyond the printed volumes through the Web site www.ElementsofPreaching.com.

Second, the individual volumes are written in an open-ended manner. The individual author's particular views are offered but in a way that invites, indeed demands, the readers to move beyond them in developing their own approaches to the preaching task. The volumes offer theoretical and practical insights, but at the last page it is clear that more must be said. Professors and students have a solid place to begin, but there is flexibility within the class (and after the class in ministry) to move beyond these volumes by building on the insights and advice they offer.

In this volume, Mary F. Foskett introduces readers to the essential elements of interpreting the biblical text for the sermon. Foskett walks a tightrope in offering preachers the main ingredients and broad methods of exegesis without offering a single recipe meant to create the one right dish. While Foskett shows preachers how to engage a text in order to discover a message for the pulpit, she refuses to allow a text to be reduced to that single message. Instead, preachers are invited to explore what they find *in* the text (the literary, theological qualities of the passage), *behind* the text (the historical context[s] of the passage), and *before* the text (the context of the contemporary community from which and to which we preach). Foskett invites the readers, as they begin to make the move from the text to the pulpit, to consider how these different arenas of exploration relate to one another and how to struggle with a passage that is troubling. Preachers who listen to biblical texts in the ways Foskett suggests will find themselves rich in new ways. They will no longer ask in anguish, "*What* can I preach from this text?" Instead, in joy, they will, "*Which* of the meanings I have discovered through this process of reading will I offer to my congregation this week?"

O. Wesley Allen Jr.

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Before the Sermon

Interpreting the Biblical Text

What I now understand to be among the most important lessons of my seminary education occurred during my very first semester as an M.Div. student. Having entered seminary with a primary interest in pastoral care, I enrolled in my first foundational course in biblical studies with the intention of meeting a core requirement and then quickly moving on to what really interested me. Little did I know that I was about to be ushered into what would eventually become the center of my life's work. Nor did I realize that biblical studies had to do not only with the collection of sacred texts that we call the Bible, but also with the communities of faith who read Scripture and the lives of individual readers. In that first semester of my seminary education, my life was forever changed by the revelation, one that has deepened in the years since, that biblical interpretation is not a simply a by-product of careful study and research. Rather, the interpretation of Scripture is a dynamic process that is shaped in important ways by the readers who engage and relate to the text. Biblical interpretation has as much to do with real people and real-world concerns as with the biblical texts that we interpret. It has as much to do with our lives in real time as with those of the great cloud of witnesses whose stories and contexts the Bible tells and reveals. Nowhere is this concept more important than in the interpretation of the Bible for sermon preparation. For, at its best, the sermon proclaims God's

living word in a way that enlivens both the biblical text and the community of faith.

In the spirit of what I began to understand first as a seminary student and have continued to examine since, this book is written primarily for M.Div. students and clergypersons seeking a concise introduction to current practices of critical biblical interpretation for sermon preparation as well as focused discussion of key facets of the interpretive process. It is not intended to replace the excellent introductions to biblical exegesis that have been previously published nor does it claim to provide a comprehensive discussion of the many methods that have been or are currently utilized in the field of biblical studies. Rather, this book aims to provide a framework for approaching the Bible that will deepen and broaden preachers' understanding of both the complexity and accessibility of biblical interpretation. It is, at its heart, an invitation to enter into deeper relationship with the Scripture that readers seek to understand, interpret, and preach both critically and faithfully.

What Is Exegesis?

There are many ways to read and study Scripture. No single approach to biblical interpretation can define how anyone, even a person of faith, should read the Bible. As a critical discipline, biblical studies offers readers particular frameworks, as well as specific tools, for engaging the biblical text. The field of biblical studies uses the term *exegesis* to describe the task of interpreting the Bible. Exegesis is often upheld in contrast to *eisegeis*. A classic formulation that distinguishes exegesis (from the Greek, "to lead out") from eisegesis ("to lead in") argues that whereas eisegesis entails reading into a text in such a way that imposes external ideas and meaning onto it, exegesis seeks to interpret a text by analyzing the language and content of the text itself. Proponents of exegesis also tend to assume that proper examination of the biblical text will yield the single most correct interpretation of the passage. We will see that to the extent that every reader brings a particular set of values, expectations, and questions to the Bible, some eisegesis is unavoidable and a plurality of plausible interpretations is always possible. What sets exegesis apart from pure eisegesis is its careful attention to the process of reading and interpreting the Bible and its respect for the text's complexity.

Perhaps a second contrast between two ways of reading the Bible will also prove illustrative. In the current revival of contemplative prayer, laypersons and clergy alike are increasingly taking up the ancient meditative practice of *lectio divina* as a means of praying the Scriptures. If we conceive of *lectio divina* as a practice of spiritual formation of an individual or small group, we may think of exegesis as a practice of critical formation wherein readers examine various aspects of the biblical text, including its historical dimensions and its interpretation and appropriation by religious communities. To consider intentionally the historical aspect of the Bible is to understand the Bible as thoroughly "anthropological."[1] As New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson suggests, "[T]he writings must be taken seriously as fully *human* productions. Divine inspiration is not excluded, but inspiration is not a fact available for study."[2] To acknowledge the Bible as a human production is to understand that its contents were written and its transmission carried out by human persons living in a particular time in real places. It is also to take seriously the notion that as readers, we hear, see, engage, and respond to the Bible in particular ways that conform or respond to the contours of our own time, history, and place in the world. In other words, the Bible is a collection of texts that were written and were subsequently read and interpreted, and continue to be interpreted, by real men and women of faith living in particular places at specific times in human history and with very real concerns. In attending to the historical aspects of Scripture, especially in light of the composition, transmission, and appropriation of its various texts, exegesis seeks to arrive at an understanding of what a biblical text may be saying to contemporary readers, what the text means for today, and how it is that we can arrive at such meaning in the first place.

Readers new to critical interpretation of the Bible, especially preaching students and clergy who have been studying (and perhaps even preaching from) the Bible for years, may indeed be wondering what all the fuss is about. Why can't readers simply read the text and immediately move to preparing the sermon? Of course, readers can choose to read and write their sermons this way. However, it is important to recognize that the call for careful exegesis arises from the nature of the biblical texts themselves. As Johnson writes of biblical interpretation, or hermeneutics:

> Now, if Scripture spoke uniformly and clearly on every subject, if its commands and directives were entirely consistent, if all its compositions represented precisely the same perspective on identical issues, then the only real hermeneutical problem would be that of translating both its words and the situations it address to present circumstances—not a small task, to be sure, but not an impossible one, either. Scripture, however, does not speak in so straightforward a fashion. Besides speaking in ancient languages only partly grasped by contemporary readers and addressing situations mostly obscure to them, Scripture presents an almost bewildering variety of perspectives among its compositions and reveals in its directives, inconsistencies, and even contradictions on a significant number of issues. Finally, Scripture simply does not speak either clearly or directly to any number of issues that are important to its present-day readers.[3]

A collection of varied and ancient texts, the Bible is neither simple nor does it speak with only one voice and from one moment in time and space. That Christian readers uphold these texts as sacred and authoritative is only the starting point for the person who is preparing to preach. The hard work comes in interpreting these texts, discerning the word to preach, and crafting the sermon.

For preachers who may be concerned that a methodical approach to interpreting the Bible might exclude the possibility of any formational engagement with Scripture, rest assured that exegesis should not hinder the process of moving from text to sermon nor exclude devotional reading of the text. What careful exegesis can do is illumine the text and the preacher's experience of it for the enrichment of preaching and the sake of his or her congregation. The aim of critical biblical interpretation for preaching is not to make reading the Bible unnecessarily complex. Rather, *the purpose of exegesis is to bring the complexity, richness, and power of the biblical text alive in such a way that enhances the faithful preaching of the divine, living word.*

Over the last fifty years, the field of biblical studies has witnessed a proliferation of methodologies and areas of specialization. Such expansion has been due to multiple factors, including, but not limited to, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library in the mid-twentieth century and the increasing interdisciplinarity of biblical studies. Over the past forty years, literary, feminist, and cultural studies as well as the social sciences have come to play an increasing role

in biblical studies. Areas of specialization within biblical exegesis alone now include narrative, reader-response, rhetorical, feminist, ideological, postcolonial, postmodern, anthropological, and social-scientific methods of interpretation. Despite the methodological expansion of biblical studies over the years, one need not specialize in any of these methods in order to exegete responsibly a biblical passage for sermon preparation. What preachers will likely find more valuable is becoming familiar with the kinds of questions and avenues of inquiry that have emerged in this growing constellation of approaches to biblical interpretation. Doing so will allow preaching students and clergy to discern the usefulness and relevance of various kinds of questions and ways of studying the Bible each time they meditate upon a text in preparation for a sermon. With that said, this volume invites readers to think of biblical exegesis as a means of engaging the text with greater clarity, intimacy, and attention by becoming familiar with the multiple dimensions of Scripture and the ways in which readers might approach them.

The Three Worlds of the Bible

A helpful and often-used model for approaching biblical interpretation focuses readers' attention on three dimensions, or "three worlds," of the Bible.[4] This model is especially useful both for distinguishing the different aspects of the biblical text that readers engage and clarifying the kinds of questions and concerns that readers bring to their study of the Bible. Knowing both the nature of one's questions and the multidimensional nature of Scripture is essential to clear exegesis. It is also an important means toward engaging in dialogue with others about the interpretation of biblical texts. One reason why Christians too often find themselves caught up in vehement and fruitless arguments with one another about the interpretation of particular texts is because readers too seldom reflect either on the perspectives they bring to their reading of Scripture or the specific dimensions of the Bible with which their questions are concerned. Being more conscious and intentional about biblical interpretation makes it easier to engage others in meaningful conversation, even, or perhaps especially, if such discussion focuses on significant differences in interpretation. Finally, the "three worlds" model is useful for understanding the aims and concerns of the differing approaches to biblical exegesis that have evolved over the past forty years.

The three worlds of the Bible is a heuristic concept that corresponds to three areas of exegetical inquiry and study. Though they do not really exist in isolation from one another, focusing attention on one particular arena of inquiry at a time goes a long way toward facilitating a preacher and congregation's engagement with a biblical passage with greater care, precision, and intentionality. In subsequent chapters, readers will be invited to explore each of these three so-called worlds of the Bible: the *literary* world (the "world of the text"); the *historical* world (the "world behind the text"), and the *contemporary* world (the "world in front of the text"). What follows here is a brief description of each.

The Literary World

The literary world *of* the text concerns the information that can be gleaned from reading the biblical passage itself, without consulting resources beyond the Bible. When concentrating on the literary world of the text, one can determine the basic form of a text (for example, Is it a story or part of a story? A hymn? A letter or part of a letter?), its component parts (its beginning, middle, end) and elements (such as plot, setting, argument, point of view, characters, conflict, resolution, themes, repetition of words and ideas), as well as its relationship to the rest of the biblical book in which the passage is located (Does it occur in the beginning, middle, or end of the biblical book? How does the passage relate to what precedes and what follows? How does it function in the book's entire story or argument or structure? Does it contain themes or motifs that occur elsewhere in the book?). Many scholars refer to this process as a "close reading" of the text. To read a biblical passage in this way is to give careful attention to its rhetorical and literary contours as well as its larger literary context. It acknowledges that the Bible is a collection of literatures, discourses, and texts. It also understands that respecting and examining the literary dimensions of the Bible will help bring it even more to life for the reader.

The Historical World

The historical world of the Bible, or the world *behind* the text, is an equally important area of inquiry that pertains to several aspects of the text. As the designation suggests, this dimension of biblical literature gives special attention to the historical nature of the Bible. As a

collection of sacred texts, the Bible was written and edited, and later transmitted and interpreted, in particular and quite varied historical contexts. When studying the Bible, readers often engage different historical aspects of the Bible at the same time. Cultivating a greater awareness of the historical world of the Bible lends additional clarity and integrity to a reader's exegesis.

The historical world of the Bible consists of the following: the historical context to which a biblical text refers; the historical context in which a biblical text was composed; the history of a text's composition, redaction (editing), and transmission; the history of a text's translation; and the history of a text's interpretation and appropriation (including its eventual inclusion in the canon). A question that may immediately come to mind is, "What difference does it make whether or not one pays attention to the historical context of the story or its composition?" If the difference between these contexts is not initially apparent, let us consider for a moment another piece of literature, specifically an example from English literature: William Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*. The historical context to which the story refers is that of ancient Rome in the first century B.C.E. While we can determine the general setting of the play from a close reading of the text, familiarity with the historical world and events to which the play refers helps readers fill out their understanding of the main characters as well as the circumstances and conflicts that shape their relationships to one another. Yet as relevant as it may be, consideration of the world to which *Julius Caesar* refers does not fully account for the play's historical dimensions. Shakespeare's own historical context, too, lends shape to his play. The concerns of Elizabethan England—that is, the issues and interests that shaped the playwright's own historical, social, and political world—permeate Shakespeare's portrayal of ancient Rome and the events the play narrates. *Julius Caesar* serves as a vehicle not just for telling the story of first-century Rome but for expressing concern about royal succession and its political implications in Shakespeare's England. Moreover, the play is written in Shakespeare's own language and contains anachronistic details that reveal more about Shakespeare's era than that of Gaius Julius Caesar. For example, in the opening scene of act 2, Shakespeare includes, for dramatic effect, the sound of a clock striking three—something that never could have occurred in first-century Rome. Thus, two important principles about

how to read the play quickly emerge. First, the play must be read with reference to the language of Elizabethan England, not Roman Latin nor contemporary English. Second, the play should not be read as an historically objective depiction of the events it recounts. The play's purpose is not that of a newspaper or history report. Its object is to tell a story about the ancient past in way that reflects and responds to the culture, concerns, and interests of the historical world in which it was written.

We find a similar situation in the composition of biblical literature. Consider, for example, aspects of the historical world of Genesis 12–25, the saga of Abram and Sarai (who are later called Abraham and Sarah) and the first half of the patriarchal narrative of Genesis 12–50. The historical context to which Genesis 12–25 refers is that of the Middle Bronze Age in ancient Mesopotamia and the Levant. As the stories these chapters tell circulated orally for centuries, their composition dates to a much later period, perhaps as early as the tenth century B.C.E. or as late as the sixth century B.C.E. Whereas knowledge of the historical world to which the saga of Abram and Sarai refers may help bring the story to life for today's reader, the historical world of the composition of Genesis is relevant for understanding how and why the stories of Abram and Sarai were written and edited in the form in which we read them today. In other words, the rhetoric of the story—that is, how it was put together—reflects Israelite or early Jewish concerns, interests, and beliefs that postdate those of the Middle Bronze Age. For example, Genesis 34:7 reads, "When they heard of it, the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel. . . ." Here "Israel" clearly reflects the consciousness of a period much later than that of the story itself, for at this point in the story, "Israel" as a nation or people does not yet exist. As this example shows, biblical literature often blends two distinct contexts—the world to which a story refers and the world in which a story is written—together.

Thus, each aspect of the historical world of the Bible signals an important way of approaching the biblical text. To readers at different times and in different places, various questions regarding the historical world of the Bible will be of more or less interest and concern than others. Exegesis does not require analysis of every aspect of the historical world of a text. Rather, it asks the interpreter to be conscious

of the particular historical dimensions of the text that he or she is inquiring after.

The Contemporary World

The contemporary world, that is, the world *in front of* the text, refers to the world of the reader. It is less about how readers apply the text to their lives and more about how readers bring their world to the text. Because a reader's world is shaped by his or her social and cultural location as well as by his or her life experience and interpersonal relations, the contemporary world of the text is constituted by the constellation of values, norms, biases, concerns, presuppositions, assumptions, and expectations that shape the lenses through which individuals and communities read the Bible. What readers bring to the Bible largely determines to what their attention will be drawn and how they will engage the text that they are interpreting. This is not to suggest that the contemporary world of the Bible mechanistically determines a reader's interpretation. It is to remind readers that, in ways of which we may not always be completely conscious, our own contexts and experiences will shape the ways in which we frame, construct, interact with, and respond to the biblical text. In other words, the word takes root and moves within the lives of real people and communities who live and engage the Bible in the context of particular histories and cultures.

In order to look more closely at the significance of the contemporary world of the Bible, consider the example of how my college students have approached the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 over the years. When I first covered this famous story in an undergraduate course I regularly teach, nearly all my students argued that the story centers on an adulterous love affair between the king and Bathsheba. In their recounting, the story sounded much like the 1951 Hollywood movie *David and Bathsheba*, which starred Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, though, to be sure, none of my students had seen or even heard of it. Students' responses to the story began to shift dramatically first in autumn 1998 and then even more in spring 1999, when an overwhelming number of students asserted that the story of David and Bathsheba illustrates not an illicit romance but a king's misuse of power and sexual abuse of a female subject. Certainly the text of 2 Samuel had not changed. What had changed significantly,

in the wake of the national scandal surrounding then President Bill Clinton and intern Monica Lewinsky, were student perceptions of, and sensitivity to, the dynamics of political power, gender, and sexual misconduct. The change in my students indicates how the context in which readers engage the Bible plays an essential role in shaping how they read and what they see in it.

The contemporary world of the Bible is not a private habitation. Insofar as each of us is a social being whose identity and experience is rooted in the multiple relationships, communities, and contexts that have shaped our lives, no one can read and understand the Bible purely as an individual. To some extent we always read the Bible in community, that is, alongside others, whether or not they are physically present with us. For this reason, the past several decades of biblical scholarship have seen heightened interest in and attention given to the social and cultural location of biblical readers. Multiple anthologies, as well as single-authored monographs, have taken up the topic of biblical interpretation by diverse readers in a range of contexts and communities. As a result, a diversity of approaches to the Bible, including African American, Asian American, Latino/Latina, African, Asian, Latin American, feminist, and postcolonial readings of the text, has been demonstrated and critically examined. Not surprisingly, globalization and the rich plurality of contemporary faith communities in the West and the rest of the world have underscored the importance of attending to the multiple contexts and communities in which the Bible is interpreted. The community of faith serves as the context in which the Bible is read and the word of God discerned and proclaimed. To preach most effectively, one should bring one's congregation into awareness when reading and interpreting Bible.

Ethics and the Three Worlds of the Bible

Because the proclamation of God's word is foundational to the life of the community of faith and the formation of Christian ethics, we must also consider the ethical implications of how readers engage the three worlds of the Bible. Since the literary, historical, and contemporary worlds of the Bible correspond to three different foci, the question of balance and integrity is pertinent. What is the relationship between the three worlds of the Bible? What makes an interpretation sound? What makes it faithful? What makes it ethical? If we are to take seriously the

notion that faithful biblical interpretation should lead to the proclamation of God's word, then these are essential questions.

In seeking to provide readers an entry point into biblical exegesis that engages current scholarly approaches to the task, this volume presupposes that sound, ethical, and faithful interpretation balances attention to the three worlds of the Bible. While a sermon will often foreground one dimension of the text, exegesis during sermon preparation should not do so to the complete exclusion of other facets. Interpretation that focuses solely on the historical world, contemporary world, or literary world of the text invariably neglects the others. As Hebrew Bible interpreter Gale Yee observes, "What is deemed important to study in a particular investigation automatically reveals what is not important to look at."[5] Readers need to read the text conscientiously and self-consciously, that is, aware of what is being brought to the center of focus and what is being left on the periphery, and why. With that said, readers for whom consideration of the contemporary world of the text is a new concept should be especially careful to give that aspect of reading the Bible its due. As Yee suggests, "At stake in foregrounding the reader is one's ethical responsibility in reading and its concomitant political repercussions. This is especially the case in reading such a foundational work as the Bible."[6] Thus, ethical, pragmatic questions such as the following should not be foreign to the biblical interpreter: "How does my reading of the Bible affect my relationships with my spouse, my children, with others in my religious community, my social community, my national community, my global community? Does my reading help in transforming a society or does it (sub)consciously affirm the status quo and collude with its sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, classism, and imperialism?"[7]

Yet even as she argues for giving such attention to the reader and the contemporary world, Yee insists that what is needed is balance in approach and intentionality. Interpretation of the Bible is always an encounter with a profoundly rich and multidimensional collection of sacred writings, one that people of faith uphold as revelatory. As Yee shows, it should be an encounter in which the author, the text, and the reader both interact with and constrain one another. For in this incarnational and reciprocal encounter between the three worlds of the text, one may hear and become readied to proclaim the word.

Biblical Interpretation for Preaching

The following chapters build on this opening discussion by inviting readers to engage in a close reading of a biblical text and to explore various ways of interacting with the passage. Along the way, you will be introduced to key terms, concepts, and sets of questions that represent current scholarly approaches to biblical interpretation. By the end of the volume, I hope you will feel equipped to continue developing your own exegetical skills so that they can become a regular part of your sermon preparation and an enlivening practice of your own study of the Bible.

Chapter 1 guides you through a close reading of a New Testament passage to facilitate your attention to the literary world of the biblical text and to foster the articulation of the questions and expectations you bring to the Bible (the world *of* the text). From there, chapter 2 invites you to consider in increasing depth the contemporary world of the Bible and the context in which you and your congregation read and interpret Scripture (the world *in front of* the text). Chapter 3 focuses on the historical world of the Bible, specifically its ancient context (the world *behind* the text). Here readers will be introduced to historical and social-scientific approaches to biblical interpretation. Chapter 4 explores recent approaches that focus on the ethics, theology, and ideology of interpreting and appropriating biblical texts. The conclusion recommends ways in which readers may take a step back to see what kinds of data constructed during the exegetical process will be most helpful and relevant to the sermon.