

Spring 1994

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Recommended Citation

Throntveit, Mark A., "Preaching from the Book of Genesis" (1994). *Faculty Publications*. 191.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/191

Published Citation

Throntveit, Mark A. "Preaching from the Book of Genesis." *Word & World* 14, no. 2 (1994): 208–13.



Preaching from the Book of Genesis

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The book of Genesis exerts a strange pull on preachers. Of all the stories in the Old Testament, the narratives in Genesis are the most familiar. The stories of creation, Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob's ladder...we remember these vignettes from our earliest days in Sunday School. Recently, the Joseph story has received a delightful, modern retelling on the stage in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." In a day when narrative approaches to theology and proclamation are increasingly touted as the key to relevance, these magnificent stories, told with an economy of expression that belies their theological depth, fairly clamor for our homiletical attention.

Unfortunately, the very familiarity of these stories, coupled with the somewhat simplistic practice of most lectionaries to employ them as illustrative of the gospel lesson for the day, frequently results in their receiving less attention in our pulpits than they deserve. Preachers trained in the last twenty-five years or so may labor under the additional burden of an overemphasis on the analysis of these stories, stemming from the alphabet soup of source criticism with its swirling letters of J, E, D, P, G, L, and N, or an overly zealous form-critical insistence that the "truth" of the story lies behind the text: "Cain and Abel isn't really about the first murder and the spread of sin, it depicts God's rejection of Cain's agricultural lifestyle in favor of Abel's nomadism." Try preaching that in America's heartland!

This essay will suggest three ways, drawn from a variety of insights and approaches, into the text of Genesis. In this regard the approaches chosen will be representative and not exhaustive. Similarly, there will be no attempt to provide mini-exegetical treatments of the fifteen or so Genesis pericopes that commonly

appear in the various lectionaries. Space will not allow such an approach and this material is already readily available. In fact, it is to be hoped that preachers will be encouraged to devote entire sermons or even sermon series to the many powerful Genesis narratives that never appear in the prescribed readings.

I. THE THEMES OF BLESSING, SAVING, AND SHALOM

Over the course of his very productive tenure at the University of Heidelberg, Claus Westermann has worked out a number of distinctions between the various activities of God as they are presented in the Bible in general and the Pentateuch in particular. These distinctions revolve around three basic conceptions of God's work as blessing, saving/judging, and shalom.

The first distinction to be drawn is that blessing is not shalom. Shalom, as this concept appears in the biblical text, is concerned with wholeness, the well-being of the entire group, now, at the present time. Within this basic understanding we come to see that the usual translation of shalom as “peace” is much too restrictive. When everything is working together for good as it was intended to do in creation, when we experience a sense of cohesiveness and integrity, when our existential engines are firing on all eight cylinders and our collective choir is singing in harmony, then one of the results of this mutual state of coherence is “peace” or the absence of war and strife. Shalom is thus horizontally relevant in that it works within the present generation with those people who are currently alive. In the book of Genesis the Joseph cycle (Genesis 37-50) lifts up God’s work of shalom as it moves from the rupture of relationship that resulted from the brothers’ selling of Joseph into slavery to the final reconciliation that occurs in Gen 50:15-21.

Blessing, on the other hand, is the power of growth, fertility, and ripening over time. Blessing is vertically relevant in that it is the process by which one moves from one generation to the next. Here it is the Abraham cycle (Genesis 12-25) that especially typifies this aspect of God’s work as it moves from the promise of a son, the next generation, to the actual birth of Isaac.

But if blessing is not the same as shalom, neither is it the same as salvation. God’s activity in saving or judging (they are simply two sides of the same shekel) is a momentary activity that happens to specific people at specific times in specific situations based upon one’s response, behavior, or relationship. God’s saving activity on behalf of the Israelites at the time of the exodus, which is at the same time a judgment upon the Egyptians, is but the clearest illustration of this aspect of God’s work. In the book of Genesis the various stories that comprise Genesis 3-11 provide further examples.

Blessing, again in distinction to saving, is God’s constant, continual activity by which the world and all that is in it is kept going. Blessing happens to every living creature, all life, all creation, regardless of their merit or relationship. God causes the rain, the most pervasive symbol of blessing in this arid section of the world, to fall on the good and the bad alike. In this regard the ancestral traditions of Genesis (Genesis 12-50) may be seen as comprising three cycles, each devoted to a particular aspect of blessing. The Abraham cycle (Genesis 12-25) centers on the

blessing of the womb as Abraham and Sarah eagerly await the birth of Isaac, the promised seed. The Jacob cycle (Genesis 26-36) is concerned, among other things, with the blessing of the flock as Jacob increases the size of his sheepfold at the expense of his Uncle Laban. The Joseph cycle (Genesis 37-50) depicts the blessing of the field as Joseph counsels pharaoh to store up the bounty of the seven years of bumper crops to offset the seven lean years that follow.

If, as many believe, the Priestly writer is responsible for the final shaping of the book of Genesis, we can see that this understanding of blessing provides the narrative backbone of the story. In four of the Priestly writer’s major texts there is a discernible progression regarding God’s work of blessing. In Gen 1:28 God *commands* (the verb is imperative) the human couple to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” This they do, as indicated by the genealogies that pepper the narrative. When God decides to start all over again after the flood, which came as a response to the growth of sin, God once again *commands* Noah, the new Adam, to “be fruitful

and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1). Again, humanity responds to the blessing, but tragically, also continues to grow in sin. In Gen 17:3-8, the next major Priestly text, God shifts from commanding to *promising* (the verbs are imperfect): “I will make you fruitful....I will multiply you.” Finally, in Exod 1:7, we see that God’s initial command, now modulated into a promise, is depicted as being *fulfilled* when it says that the Israelites “were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land (the same Hebrew word as “earth”) was filled with them” (NRSV).

In preaching from Genesis it is important to recognize this dual nature of God’s positive work among people: God’s momentary, specific, delivering act of salvation; and God’s constant, ongoing, steady, regular work of blessing, which keeps the world running and provides a context of care and concern.

Concentration on God’s act of saving is more appropriate in situations of pain, hopelessness, suffering, guilt, or despair, situations in which we need to be reminded of God’s penchant for breaking into the painful circumstances of life with deliverance, forgiveness, and hope.

Concentration on God’s act of blessing is more appropriate in those situations where the question is “Why do the wicked prosper?” when *good* things happen to *bad* people (with apologies to Harold Kushner). Under the saving typology, this makes little sense, bad people should be punished. But under the blessing typology it is clear that God must cause the “sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt 5:45, NRSV). This arises not because God has an imperfect sense of justice but as a result of God’s love for the world and commitment to the ongoing nature of creation.

Concentration on shalom, the result and goal of God’s two-pronged activity in the world, is more appropriate in situations of family strife. Our skills in fostering reconciliation, dialogue, and commitment are placed in the service of God’s intention toward wholeness and mutual interaction, as typified in the creation accounts.

II. THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE

In recent years, the feminist critique has had an enormous impact on the way we read, and therefore preach from, the book of Genesis. As early as 1837 Sarah Grimke, an American abolitionist, asserted that biblical interpretation was biased against women for the deliberate purpose of keeping them in a subordinate role. The evils of this patriarchy have become increasingly clear in subsequent generations, and have tended to erode confidence in those Genesis narratives previously called the “Patriarchal History” (Genesis 12-50).

The responses of feminists to this situation range from outright rejection of scripture as normative in their lives, through adherence to biblical authority despite the unacceptable patriarchal/androcentric character of much of the material, to the detection of voices within the Bible itself that speak against patriarchy. Obviously, for the preacher only the last two of these options provide a viable approach. But looking at these familiar texts with eyes made sensitive to the legitimate concerns thus raised can bring us deeper into dialogue with the text—a dialogue that must be at the heart of the exegetical and homiletical enterprise.

Perhaps a few examples drawn from Genesis 12-50 would be helpful at this point. In Genesis 16 both Abram and Sarai herself underestimate her importance in the promise of a son.

By suggesting that Abram take Hagar, her Egyptian slave, as his mistress in order to obtain a son through her, Sarai denies her physical contribution to the promised heir. After all, Ishmael is just as much Abram's son as Isaac will later be. The denial of the promise flowing through Ishmael is based entirely on the fact that Isaac alone is the son of Abram *and* Sarai. Abram's seed is not enough; Sarai's ovum seems to be just as important to the divine plan.

This would seem to be confirmed by a close reading of Genesis 17 in which God establishes the covenant. Here it is explicitly stated that though Ishmael will receive blessing, Isaac will be the bearer of the covenant. In addition, the significance of this covenant is marked by God's changing of Abram's name to "Abraham" *and*, in a parallel speech in the concentric structuring of the passage, God's changing of Sarai's name to "Sarah," the only biblical instance of a woman's name change. In these same speeches Sarai, now Sarah, is promised exactly the same benefits as Abram, now Abraham, namely that they will give rise to kings and that they will become nations (Gen 17:6, 16). Thus, the value of Sarah's contribution is no less significant than Abraham's.

In the Jacob cycle (Genesis 26-35) it is now clear that Rebekah, Jacob's mother, stands behind Isaac's blessing of Jacob instead of Esau (Genesis 27). She devises the plan, cooks the food, takes the blame upon herself, and provides a safe haven for Jacob with her brother Laban. Whereas the patriarchy demanded that Esau as the firstborn should receive the blessing of his father, a patriarchy that Isaac is determined to enforce, Rebekah is faithful to the explicit will of Yahweh in this regard. In an oracle delivered to Rebekah in Gen 25:23 on the occasion of an anticipatory struggle between the two sons she was carrying in her womb, Yahweh clearly decreed that "the elder shall serve the younger." Rebekah, not Isaac, is thus the

instrument used by Yahweh to implement the divine plan of blessing through Jacob's line.

In a similar fashion it is Rachel, Jacob's wife, who challenges the patriarchy of her father Laban by leaving with the "household gods," the *teraphim*, the symbols of Jacob's authority and inheritance (Genesis 31). Jacob is totally unaware of this bold act as indicated in his response to Laban's demand that he give them back (Gen 31:31-32a) and the narrator's comment that "Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them" (v. 32b, RSV). Thus, it is the women in Jacob's life that challenge the authority of the patriarchy at crucial moments in the narrative. As a result of their courage the divine plan is relentlessly pursued and brought to bear on one who remained unaware.

That the text has always maintained this to be the case is clear. But in order to hear this word of affirmation, a different set of questions, arising from the concerns of the feminist critique, was needed. The patriarchal nature of these narratives remains, especially in those sections attributed to the Elohist and Priestly sources. Nevertheless, careful readings of these passages with differing assumptions as to their supposed intentionality will continue to uncover fresh perspectives for proclamation.

III. GOD IS THE PROTAGONIST

A pervasive problem in the preaching of the ancestral narratives of Genesis 12-50, from which the majority of our lectionary passages are drawn, has to do with the determination of their character. They seem to be a conglomeration of very secular legends that have little if anything to

do with faith. Their content (rape, murder, strife and jealousy between brothers, two unsatisfied wives fighting over the sexual attentions of their husband, and cunning deception within families) seems more appropriate to afternoon soap operas than God's revealed word.

In an attempt to make these stories relevant we tend to preach them as lessons in morality, so that Joseph's troubles with his brothers lead into discussions about family relationships, and Abraham, above all, is lifted up as a model of obedience for us to emulate. This hermeneutic of "Be like Abraham!" seriously curtails the number of preachable texts, since only a few of these texts, most notably Gen 12:1-8 and Gen 22:1-14, depict Abraham as a person of faith. What do we do with the Abraham that forces Sarah to lie in order to save his own skin (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18)? Would we ever encourage our congregations to "be like Jacob" and practice cunning and deceit in attaining their own ends? Should Sarah be emulated in her scoffing laughter at the promise?

But what if these stories are not about Sarah, Abraham, Jacob, and Rebekah? What if the protagonist in the drama is God, and the story is about how God faithfully keeps all the promises made to Abraham despite the obstacles the other characters in the story erect in ways that seem to inhibit their fulfillment? Then the message of these texts is not "*Be* like Abraham, or Sarah, or Jacob!" but rather "*You are* like Abraham, or Sarah, or Jacob!" and the glorious good news of the gospel is that God knows exactly how to deal with people like us as he ceaselessly goes

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about the business of working with Abraham's or Sarah's or our own lack of faith, or Jacob's or Rebekah's or our own cunning deception, to keep those promises, transforming us, like Israel's ancestors, into people of faith.

IV. TWO FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

1. The recent success of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" among young and old alike suggests that these texts have a powerful story to tell, a story that stands on its own apart from sermonic "explanations." Like the parables of Jesus, these passages often "preach themselves" when they are allowed to be experienced as their crafters intended.

Why not take a leaf from the pages of our Palm/Passion Sunday and Holy Week liturgical traditions and stage some of the longer stories—like Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 3), Abraham and Sarah at Gerar (Genesis 20), the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 24), or Isaac's blessing of Jacob (Gen 27:1-28:5)—as reader's theater productions with members of the congregation reading assigned roles? Most of these stories are carried by the dialogue between the various characters and lend themselves quite well to this kind of approach. The sermon could then set the stage for what the congregation will actually experience as the story evokes its varied responses. Who knows? The Sunday dinner table may continue the discussion these stories have elicited for some 3,500 years.

2. Another approach might take the Genesis account's candidly straightforward depiction of Israel's ancestors seriously. Israel was unafraid to portray its forebears in a realistic, "warts and all" fashion. By dealing with Abraham's lack of faith (Gen 12:10-20), Sarah's laughing at the promise (Gen 18:12-15), or Jacob and Rebekah's deception of Isaac (Genesis 27) openly and honestly, congregations can come to see that the life of faith is not a series of untroubled pious acts. Rather these stories testify to the struggle of faith as one's relationship with God continues

to grow and develop within the surrounding grace, mercy, and forgiveness of a loving God
utterly committed to keeping the divine promise.