

Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003. (222 pp.)

Walter Kaiser is no stranger to those interested in preaching from the Old Testament. Most seminary students have at least passing familiarity with Kaiser's *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, and many others have encountered with profit his earlier work *The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching* in which he presents and develops his concept of the promise motif as the central unifying theme of the Old Testament. Arguably, Kaiser has possibly done more to keep the importance of preaching the Old Testament before the contemporary Church and her preachers than any other evangelical Old Testament scholar. He has accomplished this through his teaching at evangelical seminaries both in this country and abroad, through the more than thirty books he has written, and through his own passionate preaching from the Old Testament. However, his most recent contribution, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament (PTOT)*, may in fact be his most significant.

Purpose and Intent

The material in *PTOT* was initially delivered as a series of lectures at the Biblical Seminary of the Philippines and served as an initial attempt to reiterate the value of the Old Testament in light of the inroads postmodern thinking has made in the hermeneutics of Evangelicalism. Kaiser recounts a telling incident where the pastor of a contemporary mega-church confessed his fear for the future viability of churches such as his own unless new and effective ways are developed for putting “theological truth and biblical teaching into the idiom of the day so that it will capture the eyes, ears, and wills of the new generations.” (p. 10) In evaluating the responses offered by contemporary evangelical

scholarship, Kaiser observes the continued and deplorable absence of the Old Testament in most realms of the emerging Church. This work is his attempt to fill that void. Specifically, material already exists addressing the reasons why the Church should hear the Old Testament; what is needed is an explanation as to how preachers should preach this material, and *PTOT* provides such an explanation from the standpoint of a traditional, conservative, text-based, grammatical-historical hermeneutic. Additionally, Kaiser attempts to add to this hermeneutic a careful consideration of particular literary genres present in the Old Testament which play a significant role in the proper interpretation and preaching of the material contained therein.

Structure and Content

The material in *PTOT* is arranged in two primary sections. The first section consists of four chapters stressing the need to preach and teach from the Old Testament. In the first chapter, Kaiser briefly states the value of the Old Testament for the contemporary Church. Much of this chapter is a recapitulation of what he has written elsewhere. Basically, he argues that the Old Testament has abiding value since it is God's powerful Word for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training and was authoritatively used in these ways by none other than the Lord and his apostles. (pp. 16-17, 24) The church should also value the Old Testament because in addition to leading us to Christ (p. 20), it addresses the major questions of life under God. (p. 23) His basic premise in this chapter is the New Testament must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament ("In a forward, rather than a backward approach" p. 26), and he posits four major reasons for seeing the Old Testament in this light (pp. 26-27). In the second chapter, Kaiser addresses the problem of the Old Testament, namely identifying the

theological center that unifies, unlocks, and explains the message of the Old Testament. While some theologians consider it fashionable to challenge the existence of such a unifying scheme, Kaiser argues that such a scheme does exist in the “promise plan” of God expressed in condensed form in 1 Peter 1:3-12. (p. 31) He has presented his case in much fuller form elsewhere (*Toward an Old Testament Theology*), but the material here is an excellent summation of his view. In the remainder of the chapter, he addresses a host of additional questions related to the place and use of the Old Testament in the contemporary Church. In the third chapter, he returns to address the value of the Old Testament for forming, understanding, and practicing doctrine, ethics, practical living, and preaching in the Church. (p. 40-41) Kaiser contends the contemporary Church lost the Old Testament because her preachers studiously neglected this portion of Divine revelation. This neglect is occasioned by an aversion to the allegorical approach to preaching in the pre-reformation era; the adjusted but still typological emphasis of the Reformers, and the biblical skepticism toward much of the Old Testament produced by the Enlightenment. Kaiser’s answer to this deplorable condition is the subject of his fourth chapter—a recommitment to expository preaching in general and from the Old Testament in specific. Much of this material is a condensed and updated from material originally presented in *Toward an Exegetical Theology*. One new and important emphasis in his approach to presenting expository preaching is the need to move from merely presenting information to applying the sermon in order to produce action from the hearer. While technically he is moving from hermeneutics proper to homiletics, his reasoning is compelling.

Evangelicals in particular are known for leaving messages at the cognitive level. We often think we have done our job when we have asked God’s people to “think

about this,” or “believe this,” or “remember this.” But it suddenly struck me one day that Beelzebub could respond just as well to my sermons if that was all I was asking people to do. The devil believes all of these things and more. He knows they are true; he just doesn’t act on any of these claims. Thus, we must call for action. Perhaps this is why up to 30 percent of Americans will say they have had a born again experience with God or at least some kind of personal experience with God, but we see so little Christian impact on the culture. It may be that their “faith” is all too cerebral and is not put into action and reflected in a change of living or acting. (p. 59)

The second section of *PTOT* consists of seven chapters each addressing a specific genre of Old Testament literature from the perspective of preaching that material to a contemporary audience. Although some material in this section exists in his prior works, particularly *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (prophecy, narrative, and poetry), Kaiser has significantly revised and expanded both the material itself as well as the genre categories he addresses. His chapter on narrative is especially helpful in laying out a basic approach to historical narrative starting with identifying the scene in the bigger picture and then moving through the elements of plot, point of view, characterization, setting, dialogue, and structure in order to determine the original message and contemporary relevance of the narrative in view. He has a helpful section dealing with stylistic and rhetorical devices common in biblical narrative such as repetition, omission, chiasm, and irony.

His chapter on preaching from Old Testament wisdom material is particularly helpful. Kaiser focuses attention on the difficult nature of proverbial literature and points out that the value of a biblical proverb lies in the particular generalization of truth that arose from a past situation(s) which can appropriately be applied to a future situation(s). (p. 86-87). He particularly associates the biblical proverbial material with what had been given by God in the legal sections of the Mosaic Covenant. (p. 85)

. . . so much of the Book of Proverbs was a mere representation in proverbial form of what had been announced in the legal sanctions of the Torah. Therefore,

wisdom is not offered as a substitute for faith or belief; it is offered to teach those who have found faith in the coming seed of promise through the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David about how we are to live the life of obedience as an evidence of that faith. Unlike the law of God in the Torah, from which so much of the Book of Proverbs finds its spiritual source, wisdom expands on the same themes and instructs how one can put these same principles into practical and useful application in everyday life. (pp. 85-86)

Kaiser also devotes a significant amount of material in this chapter to “non-proverbial” wisdom found in books like Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. In each case he provides a hermeneutical key for unlocking the book in question as well as examples showing how that key is linked to the primary message and its development in the book.

Preaching and teaching Old Testament prophetic literature is the next chapter in the book. Kaiser provides a wealth of helpful information in condensed form starting with a four step procedure for the exegete to follow when treating prophetic material in general. After determining the theme or purpose of the prophetic book in question, the major literary sections marking the structure of the book must be identified. Next, the literary genre(s) employed by the prophet must be identified and marked. Finally, an investigation of the historical and social setting of the book must be undertaken. After this preliminary process, the exegete can now proceed to the actual exegesis of the passage in question. Kaiser includes special help for interpreting oracles of judgment, oracles of salvation, woe oracles, and prophetic lawsuits all of which frequently occur in prophetic literature. He concludes this chapter with an important reminder to carefully distinguish between unconditional and conditional statements made by the prophets as well as a warning to exercise care lest what is divinely intended to point to Christ become “christoexclusive” instead of “christocentric” in the eyes of the interpreter. (pp. 112-113)

The final four chapters in this section deal with preaching Old Testament laments, Law or Torah, psalms/praise literature, and apocalyptic literature. The material in these chapters is presented clearly and is well illustrated from specific passages in each genre. The diligent pastor wishing to preach from material in these genres will find a wealth of helpful suggestions and practical instruction that can be put to immediate and profitable use in his preparation and preaching.

Kaiser concludes with an essay contending that the Word of God is the primary biblical means for changing the world. Taking the example of the early Church in Acts as his primary context, he asserts boldly that the accurate expository preaching of God's Word provides authority for an individualistic society, and application in a pluralistic society. His words are worth repeating here.

So let us mark it down as a principle: Where the preaching of God's Word is thin or abandoned for more "relevant" issues and encouragements, the growth, power, and effectiveness of the church wanes and ultimately is extinguished. But where the Word of God multiplies, spreads, and is sought after by all, the body of Christ demonstrates a resourcefulness and a power that goes forward despite all modern or ancient barriers, oppositions, or persecutions. . . . What is called for is not a rote bag of wind that is pirated from some self-help book or someone's four or five easy steps to be this or that in life. The Book of Acts gives us precedence to expect that where the Word of God preached faithfully—both in its replication of the exact content of the passage and in its structure—there we can expect to see the power of the Holy Spirit joining the Word of God and having profound effect non only on the speaker, but on the hearer as well. (p. 174)

Evaluation and Conclusions

PTOT makes a concise but valuable contribution to the literature on expositing the Old Testament. Kaiser's writing style engages the reader and expresses complex concepts in a way that makes them comprehensible. The book has many strengths, not the least of which is its simplicity. This is most notable to the reader who has had to

endure other writers on this topic. Upon finishing the book, most readers will feel that they really can tackle the difficult topic of preaching through Old Testament literature. While the book does cover material Kaiser has introduced elsewhere, the material is not mere rehash. Much of his material on narrative, wisdom literature, and biblical prophecy has been treated in prior works, but he does an excellent job of presenting it in fresh ways and in most cases with a fuller treatment. His section on Biblical lament is easily the best treatment on the topic in print. His insight into the connection between the legal sections of the Torah and the proverb literature is fascinating and will open up huge sections of the Bible for preaching that are normally closed to the average preacher. This is part of Kaiser's genius—the ability to help the reader see and understand the connection between two seemingly unrelated portions of Scripture. Once those connections are made, Kaiser has provided sufficient information and instruction for the reader to make significant hermeneutical, exegetical, and theological strides forward from Kaiser's beginning point. These connections, especially in Proverbs, are especially valuable in providing a theological context and anchor so that the material is seen as more than mere moralistic statements to guide and form a contemporary ethic in isolation of God's broader theological concerns. One of the more valuable strengths to the book is the multiple examples of sermons developed from each genre addressed. Not only do these sermons model the principles and exhibit the process unique to each genre—they are powerful messages in their own right. In this sense, much of what Kaiser does in the name of helping the reader to understand how to do the exegetical process results in exactly the kind of impact and response Kaiser hopes will accompany the preaching ministry of his readers.

Yet another strength of the book is Kaiser's first section where he restates the case for the value of the Old Testament to the contemporary Church and her preachers. His citations clearly indicate that he has interacted fully and responsibly with other key writers on the topic and where appropriate, he kindly but forcefully reveals where they have reached a wrong conclusion. Two important examples demonstrate this clearly. First, he acknowledges the impact that postmodern literary studies have had on hermeneutics and then clearly and forcefully rejects any departure from the single authorial intent of the text to be discovered by careful and accurate grammatical-historical exegesis. (p. 10-11). This approach and the boldness with which it is presented is rare among modern evangelicals writing on this topic. Second, he disagrees with the modern approach of reading the Old Testament backwards through the lens of the New Testament writers. While acknowledging the case made for such an approach by writers such as Achtemeier, he clearly calls for the primacy of the Old Testament in itself and urges his readers to read it forward into the New Testament in appropriate hermeneutical ways. This is reiterated throughout this first section in different ways but the ultimate message comes down to a repeated reminder that the Old Testament was the Bible of the early Church and should not be removed from our pulpits now that we have the New Testament.

A final strength mentioned here are the two appendices. Both are helpful but the second is a "must read" for all who teach hermeneutics and homiletics on any level. In this essay, he openly challenges the ethical implications of the new hermeneutic and insists that allowing the original author to determine the original meaning of his text is a

matter of biblical integrity—an argument not often addressed or countered as of yet by those who defend a looser and more contemporary approach to where meaning resides.

The book is not without its weaknesses; however, most of them are matters of preference and style. Readers will find helpful material on preaching biblical prophecy, but it is hardly sufficient to cover all of the key issues related to that topic. In fairness to Kaiser, he has written other works addressing this topic more fully, but even in a work of this nature, his material leaves the reader wishing for more. In some cases the reader could be left with more questions than answers. Second, this reviewer was not convinced by the case made for apocalyptic literature. Much of what was included there could rightly be included in the prophetic material associated with the day of the Lord. In fact, in prior works Kaiser did not make such a distinct demarcation, and one is left wondering if this is not more of a response to the modern tendency to import an apocalyptic genre common to the inter-testamental period than a substantial defense of such a genre in biblical literature.

All in all, the book's strengths far outweigh any perceived weaknesses and the reader will find the help provided by the book far outweigh any perceived weaknesses on the part of this reviewer. It is a practical guide for preaching and teaching through biblical material that any responsible preacher will admit is difficult. Those churches fortunate to have preachers who read *PTOT* will be greatly blessed as they see the Old Testament through new and accurate eyes.