

# Homiletics and Hermeneutics

## Four Views on Preaching Today

Edited by

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Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
[www.bakeracademic.com](http://www.bakeracademic.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gibson, Scott M., 1957– editor. | Kim, Matthew D., 1977– editor.

Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim, eds., *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018).

Exported from Logos Bible Software, 9:45 AM December 20, 2021.

Title: Homiletics and hermeneutics : four views on preaching today / edited by Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Academic, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018020567 | ISBN 9780801098697 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Preaching. | Bible—Homiletical use. | Bible—Hermeneutics. | Doctrinal preaching. | Hermeneutics—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4211.3 .H656 2018 | DDC 251—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018020567>

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Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

*To our colleagues in the  
Evangelical Homiletics Society*

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# Christiconic View\*

ABRAHAM KURUVILLA

## “How Do You Read?”

When an expert in religious law asked Jesus about what he had to do to “inherit eternal life,” Jesus replied with a counterquestion: “What is written in the Law? How do you read [it]?” ([Luke 10:26](#)). The latter is a question that still reverberates over the millennia: How does one read and interpret Scripture for application?

A few years ago, in a church I visited, I found a copy of a popular daily devotional that can be seen in the foyer of many churches. Skimming through its pages in an idle moment, I spotted a devotional on [Acts 28](#). Paul is shipwrecked in Malta. And he joins everyone else in helping out, picking up sticks for a fire. So, the devotional recommended, we too should be willing to do menial jobs in churches. Always be willing to do even the lowliest job. Of course, the writer of the devotional conveniently forgot about the viper that came out from the cord and bit the hapless apostle.

I, being the clever guy that I am, could use that part of [Acts 28](#) to recommend exactly the opposite: *Never, ever* do menial tasks, because—who knows?—a venomous beast, usually of the two-legged variety, may sink its fangs into you!

While Jesus refers to the law in his query to the expert in religious law who asked him what he should do to inherit eternal life, reading for application from any part of Scripture is an issue that has plagued the church for millennia. It has been the gaping hole in every theory of preaching. How does one read the Bible to find *valid* application? David Buttrick, homiletics scholar, once said:

Many books have been written on “biblical preaching”; specifically on how preachers can move step by step from the Bible passage to a sermon.... But in all such books there seems to be a gap. There’s something left out in between. The crucial moment

\* Portions of this essay were presented in the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary (February 3, 2015) and at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (San Antonio, November 16, 2016). Also see Abraham Kuruvilla, “[‘What Is the Author Doing with What He Is Saying?’ Pragmatics and Preaching—An Appeal!](#)” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 60, no. 3 (2017): 557–80; and Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

All Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

between exegesis and homiletical vision is not described. The shift between the study of a text and the conception of a sermon—perhaps it occurs in a flash of imagination—is never discussed. So alert readers are left with the odd impression that we move from the Bible to a contemporary sermon by some inexplicable magic!<sup>1</sup>

The lot of the homiletician is not easy: each week, this intrepid soul has to negotiate the formidable passage from ancient text to modern audience—a burdensome responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Stanley Porter agrees: “The move from the original text of Scripture, with all of its time-bound character, to theological truths for life today is one of the most demanding intellectual tasks imaginable”—a task that confronts preachers each time the Bible is expounded.<sup>3</sup>

How is all the intricate detail in the historic text relevant to the modern listener? The crux of the hermeneutical problem is the traversal from the then of the text to the now of the audience: words written in an earlier age are to be transposed in some fashion into a later era. How are we to read the text for preaching and application purposes?

In this chapter I will propose what I call a *christiconic* interpretation of the text. I will approach the issue by exemplifying *biblical* readings for application, and then proceed to detail the *linguistic*, *theological*, *applicational*, and *homiletical* concepts that undergird such readings.

## Biblical Rationale

A couple of biblical examples first—both from the Old Testament—will depict a way of reading texts to arrive at valid application specific for the pericope under consideration.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David G. Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 89.

<sup>2</sup> James D. Smart called this “a perilous road.” *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, 1970), 33–34.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley E. Porter, “Hermeneutics, Biblical Interpretation, and Theology: Hunch, Holy Spirit, or Hard Work?,” in *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*, by I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 121.

<sup>4</sup> I’ve employed Old Testament examples here because it is pericopes from this corpus that create the most difficulties in interpretation for preaching and application. And I’ve used narrative pericopes in both examples because the bulk of Scripture is narrative, the genre that

## 1 Samuel 15

Take the narrative in [1 Samuel 15](#) (the story of Saul being ordered by God to kill all the Amalekites). The prophet Samuel passes on God’s message to King Saul that he should annihilate these peoples: “Listen to the voice [קוֹל, *qol*] of the word of Yahweh” ([15:1](#)). Sadly, we do not find “voice” in most of our English Bibles; such a literal translation of the Hebrew is found only in the King James Version and its heirs. The seeming redundancy of “voice” is swept under the rug in all other major English translations, which essentially have “Listen to the word of Yahweh.” Hold that thought.

Saul, as we know, does not obey: rather than eliminate all the animals and humans as commanded, he saves the good ones of the former and the chief of the latter, likely as trophies for personal enrichment and glory. Soon after, Samuel confronts Saul. The king declares he has done everything that God told him to do. Whereupon Samuel says, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of oxen which I hear?” ([15:14](#)).

But it is not “bleating” and “lowing” in the Hebrew—it is “voice” (קוֹל). With this “voice” (of animals, [15:14](#)) and the earlier “voice” (of God, [15:1](#)), the author is *doing* something with this narrative, telling readers that *the one committed to God listens to the voice of God, not the voice of worldly seductions*. Again, most English translations render “voice” in each case here as “bleating” and “lowing,” respectively, and thus, when this choice is combined with the omission of “voice” in translations of [15:1](#), the force of the text is almost completely negated! The author’s doing with what he is saying is sorely attenuated by a misguided enthusiasm for what actually happened *behind* the text—bleating and lowing—and, perhaps, for an idiomatic English rendition of those behind-the-text events. But “voice” forms a critical motif in the whole story, the key to determining what the author was doing in this pericope (see also [15:19](#), [20](#), [22](#), [24](#)). These missteps are a clear indication that Bible translators and scholars do not think in terms of what biblical authors are doing with what they

poses the greatest challenge for the preacher. Nevertheless, what I claim herein is applicable to all genres. See, for instance, this type of pericope-by-pericope analysis done on an entire New Testament epistle: Abraham Kuruvilla, *Ephesians: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015). Though “pericope” has the technical sense of a demarcated portion of the Gospels, I use it in this essay simply to designate a preaching text, irrespective of genre or length.

Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim, eds., *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018).

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are saying. And here in [1 Samuel 15](#), the thrust of the text is clearly the issue of listening to and obeying God.

## ***The Aqedah***

Here is another example of authors' doings—the Aqedah, in [Genesis 22](#).<sup>5</sup> The account begins with a time stamp: “Now it came about *after these things*, that God tested Abraham” ([22:1](#)). What exactly were “these things”?

In [Genesis 12](#), God spoke to the patriarch for the first time; in [Genesis 22](#), for the last time. Both addresses contain the same command, which is found nowhere else in the Old Testament: לֶךְ-לְךָ, (*lek-lka*), “go forth/out” ([Gen. 12:1](#); [22:2](#)). Both stress a journey, an altar, and promised blessings. In [Genesis 12](#), God commanded Abraham to leave his relatives and father's house ([12:1–3](#)). Yes, Abraham showed faith in stepping out as directed, but he took along his nephew, Lot, even though the divine word called for a separation from relatives. Was Abraham thinking of Lot as his likely heir, seeing that he himself was already seventy-five years old, and his wife sixty-five ([12:4](#))?

Soon after, as Abraham steps into the Negev, his caravan is hit by a famine ([Gen. 12:9–10](#)), and he promptly decamps to Egypt. Could he not trust God to provide? And one knows what happened in that land of refuge: Abraham passed off his wife, Sarah, as his sister, lest he get killed by an amorous Pharaoh ([12:12–14](#)). Wait—since God had promised him seed, why would Abraham have to worry about losing his life before he had at least one child?

Later, the still childless Abraham tries to name Eliezer, his steward, as his heir ([Gen. 15:2–3](#)), an attempt that God immediately nixes: Abraham's heir will be “one who shall come forth from [Abraham's] own body” ([15:4](#)). The patriarch then resorted to a compromise: perhaps the chosen heir “from [his] own body” was to come through the maternal agency of a concubine ([16:2](#)). Acting on this misconception, Abraham fathers Ishmael through Hagar, the Egyptian—another fiasco. Faithlessness constantly characterizes Abraham's response to God's promise of an heir.

Then, to make matters worse, in [Genesis 20](#) Abraham again palms off his wife,

<sup>5</sup> For further details, see Kuruvilla, “[The Aqedah: What Is the Author Doing with What He Is Saying?](#),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55 (2012): 489–508; Kuruvilla, *Genesis: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2014), 250–64.



Sarah, as his sister! This time to a local ruler, Abimelech (20:2), but for the same reason that he had conducted his subterfuge in Genesis 12—in fear for his own life (20:11), again doubting God’s promises.

Thus, all along, Abraham is seen rather clumsily stumbling along in his faith in God’s Word.<sup>6</sup> Genesis 12–20, then, is not exactly an account of pristine faith on the part of the patriarch.<sup>7</sup> And, now in Genesis 22, Abraham is tested: Would Abraham trust God after all that he had gone through? He would.

Notice the key phrase in the acclamation of the angel of Yahweh at the end of Abraham’s test, in Genesis 22:12: “Now I know that you *fear God*” (יָרָא אֱלֹהִים, *yere’ elohim*). The last time “fear of God” was mentioned in the Abrahamic saga was in 20:11 (in fact, these are the first two occurrences of the phrase in Scripture). When Abimelech confronted Abraham with his wife/sister deception, Abraham’s excuse was that he had thought, “Surely there is no *fear of God* [יָרֵאת אֱלֹהִים, *yir’at elohim*] in this place, and they will kill me on account of my wife” (20:11). The irony is that Abimelech and his people were terror-stricken by the possibility of having gone against God—they were said to be “greatly frightened [מְאֹד ... וַיִּירָאוּ, *wayyir’u ... m’od*]” (20:8). On the other hand, it was *Abraham* who did not fear God enough to trust his God to take care of him in this crisis.

But that was in Genesis 20. In Genesis 22, Abraham appeared to have learned his lesson in fearing/trusting God, as the angel acknowledged (22:12). What had changed the patriarch’s attitude was the crucial intervening event of Genesis 21, between Abraham’s faithlessness in Genesis 20 and his faithfulness in Genesis 22: the birth of the promised heir, Isaac. And, as Isaac was born, three times in two verses God’s faithfulness in this matter was established unequivocally: “Yahweh took note of Sarah *as he had said*” (21:1a); “Yahweh did for Sarah *as he had promised*” (21:1b); “Sarah conceived and bore a son ... at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him” (21:2). This threefold reminder of the divine promise of an heir was a rebuke to Abraham’s faithlessness thus far: God, ever faithful, had

<sup>6</sup> Each of these pericopes detailing events in the patriarch’s life has a specific thrust, of course. See Kuruvilla, *Genesis*, 147–287.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham’s faith is a wavering one, notwithstanding his obedient setting forth in Gen. 12 and his creditable trust in God regarding the extent of his progeny (Gen. 15:5–6). It was in the specifics of how the divine promise of a seed would be fulfilled that Abraham faltered in his faith ... until the Aqedah.

done as he had said, promised, and spoken—Abraham could surely trust him!

And in [Genesis 22](#), trust him he does. At the end of that traumatic test, the divine declaration, “Now I know that you *fear God*” ([22:12](#)), gave proof to the fact that Abraham now trusted God enough to obey him without question. “[Genesis 22](#) may appropriately be read as a, arguably the, primary canonical exposition of the meaning of ‘one who fears God,’” entailing “obedience of the most demanding kind,” grounded in a deep trust in God.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Aqedah defines the meaning of **יְרֵאת אֱלֹהִים**—obedience and trust that holds back nothing from God, absolutely nothing!

Without even scrutinizing the details of Abraham’s test, the question of his loyalties is answered in the pre-test and post-test descriptors of Isaac:

Pre-test:

[22:2](#) “your son, your only [son], whom you love”

Post-test:

[22:12](#) “your son, your only [son]”

[22:16](#) “your son, your only [son]”

The threefold description of Isaac in [Genesis 22:2](#) was to emphasize that this son, this particular child, was the one Abraham *loved*. And surely it is significant that this is the first time the word “love” (**אהב**, *’hv*) occurs in the Bible. This love of Abraham for Isaac was a crucial element in the test, a love that potentially stood in the way of his fear of, and faith in, God. The subsequent post-test deletion of the phrase “whom you love” clearly indicated that Abraham had passed the examination. In sum, the test proved the patriarch’s absolute allegiance to God—his unadulterated love for the deity over and against anything that advanced a rival claim to that love: fear of God.<sup>9</sup> Nothing would stand between Abraham and God. And, in a circuitous way, the text further confirms this.

<sup>8</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79, 96. Faith is, of course, an integral part of that “fear.” Abraham’s faith in God is underscored in [22:5](#), where the result that Abraham expected as the outcome of the test is stated: “I and the lad—we shall go . . . , and we shall worship, and *we shall return.*”

<sup>9</sup> The equation of “fear of God” and “love for God” is not illegitimate: [Deut. 6:2, 13](#) command fear, while the Shema calls for love ([6:5](#)); [Deut. 10:12](#) and [13:3–4](#)—each passage has both elements; also see [Deut. 10:20](#) with [11:1](#); as well as [Pss. 31:19, 23; 145:19–20](#).

An element of the account that has bewildered interpreters throughout the ages is the disappearance of Isaac from the Abraham stories after [Genesis 22:16](#). Indeed, the narrative itself concludes with, “So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba” ([22:19](#)). No Isaac? What happened to him? In fact, after this narrative, father and son are never shown speaking to each other again in Genesis. After the test, it is as if Isaac has altogether vanished. But the author is *doing* something with what he is *saying*. A line had been drawn; the relationship between father and son had been clarified; the tension between love (fear) of God and love of son had been resolved. Now *Abraham* so loved *God* that he gave his only begotten son. And to bring that home to readers, father and son are separated for the rest of their days—literarily separated, that is, for the purpose of achieving the narrator’s theological agenda: the love/fear of God is to trump every other human allegiance! It is only by discerning this theological thrust, the author’s *doing*, that valid application is possible: being willing, ourselves, to give everything up for God.<sup>10</sup>

It is best to privilege the text and its immediate context to figure out what the author was *doing* with what he was saying in this text. And such a reading demands respect for the finely granular and brilliantly hued particulars of the text, garnered by an exegetical undertaking that produces tremendous yield for preaching and application purposes. In fact, this is true of all pericopes I have looked at thus far, both in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>11</sup> One might interpret the Bible in many ways depending

<sup>10</sup> There is no textual reason here to move to a typological interpretation of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. Neither vocabulary nor New Testament allusion supports such an operation. In any case, later layering of significance, if any, does not change the meaning of the older text, its delicate nuances, intricate detail, and carefully negotiated turns, which result in an incisive textual thrust that powerfully impacts lives both ancient and modern. Otherwise, there is the “strong danger of ultimate superficiality” when the ancient text is not allowed to speak for itself and express its primary message (Moberly, *Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 140). For more on the details of [Gen. 22](#) that substantiate such a reading, see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 211–38.

<sup>11</sup> For other examples of authors’ doings in pericopes, developed pericope by pericope through individual books, see my commentaries, besides the ones on Genesis and Ephesians: *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012); *Judges: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

on one's goals for those interpretations. But when we interpret the text for preaching (and life change)—and I emphasize that that purpose is the exclusive concern of this essay—we must focus upon what the author is *doing* with what he is saying in that particular text in order to elicit valid application for readers. So what is this entity—the author's *doing* with what he is saying?