

THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS*

Abraham Kuruvilla

INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST ARTICLE IN THIS SERIES discussed the importance of a vision for preaching, focusing on hermeneutics for homiletics.¹ Authors *do* things with what they say, and this goes for productions scripted and spoken, sacred and secular. The thrust of the text, its pragmatics, must be discerned. Only then can we move to valid application. In developing this vision, I have borrowed from Paul Ricoeur and his understanding of the *world in front of the text*. The Bible as a whole projects a *world in front of the text*—God’s ideal world—segments of which are portrayed by individual pericopes. Each sermon on a pericope is God’s gracious invitation to live in God’s ideal world by meeting the requirements of that world called for in that pericope’s world-segment. Or to put it another way, as they accept the divine invitation in each pericope, sermon by sermon, God’s people apply pericopal theology and increasingly inhabit God’s ideal world. One pericope at a time, the various aspects of Christian life are gradually brought into alignment with the will of God for the glory of God: theology is put into shoe leather, and God’s ideal world is becoming reality. This is the goal of preaching.

The second article in this series developed the impact of such a vision for preaching, focusing on *christiconic* interpretation.² Since only one Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, has perfectly met all of God’s demands, being without sin, one can say that this Person alone has

* This is the third article in the four-part series “A Vision for Preaching,” delivered as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, February 3–6, 2015.

Abraham Kuruvilla is Research Professor of Pastoral Ministries, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.

¹ See Abraham Kuruvilla, “Pericopal Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (January–March 2016): 3–17.

² See Abraham Kuruvilla, “Christiconic Interpretation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (April–June 2016): 131–46.

fully met every theological thrust of every pericope. He alone has abided by the theology of every pericope. In other words, Christ alone has perfectly inhabited the *world in front of the text*. So each pericope, portraying a world-segment, depicts a facet of the image of Christ, showing what it means to perfectly fulfill, as he did, the values of God’s ideal world as depicted in that pericope (i.e., pericopal theology). The Bible as a whole, then, portrays what a perfect human looks like, exemplified by Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the perfect Man. So Scripture depicts Christ’s image. And living by the theology of each pericope, we become progressively more Christlike as we align ourselves to the image of Christ displayed in each pericope. So preaching facilitates the conformation of the children of God to the image of the Son of God. Indeed, God’s ultimate goal for his children is that they look like his Son, Jesus Christ, in his humanity—“conformed to the image [εἰκῶν] of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). Thereby we have a christiconic hermeneutic.

VISION FOR PREACHING

This article and the next address implications of the vision for preaching that is here in one long sentence.³

VISION for PREACHING	
Biblical preaching	<i>Preaching Is Biblical</i>
by a leader of the church	<i>Preaching Is Pastoral</i>
in a gathering of Christians for worship	<i>Preaching Is Ecclesial</i>
is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture	<i>Preaching Is Communicational</i>
discerned by theological exegesis,	<i>Preaching Is Theological</i>
and of its application to that specific body of believers,	<i>Preaching Is Applicational</i>
that they may be conformed to the image of Christ	<i>Preaching Is Conformational</i>
for the glory of God,	<i>Preaching Is Doxological</i>
all in the power of the Holy Spirit.	<i>Preaching Is Spiritual</i>

Figure 1: Vision for preaching

³ For more details, see Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015).

I have deliberately refrained from calling this recital a “definition,” preferring to label it a “vision.” A definition is far too categorical for what I am attempting in this work. My goal is not to provide a precisely demarcated boundary within which is “preaching” and without which is everything that is not. Rather, I seek to articulate this vision as a target toward which all preachers—novices and experts and everyone in between—can work.⁴ In other words, this vision is not the prescription of a precise destination with GPS coordinates and a voice that tells you either that you have arrived or you have not. Rather it is more of a road to travel, a direction to take, a momentum to develop. This vision for preaching is thus an ideal that preachers (and churches) can aim for. It is offered as a big-picture depiction to show how preaching fits in with the rest of pastoral ministry, how it is consistent with biblical and systematic theology, how it incorporates aspects of communication theory, rhetoric, and language philosophy, and how it plays a key role in the spiritual formation of God’s people through Scripture and by the agency of the Holy Spirit, all for the furtherance of Christ’s kingdom and the exaltation of God’s name.

An important element of this vision for preaching—that preaching is *conformational*—was already covered in the second article of the series. Time and space keep me from expanding on the facets of the vision that propose that preaching is *doxological* and *spiritual*. This third article deals with preaching being *communicational* and *theological*. The fourth and last article will describe preaching as *biblical*, *pastoral*, *ecclesial*, and *applicational*.

PREACHING IS COMMUNICATIONAL

“Biblical preaching . . . is the *communication* of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture . . .”⁵

Communication of any kind—sacred or secular, spoken or scripted—is now increasingly recognized as a communicator *doing* something with what is communicated. Only after grasping this

⁴ For the same reason, I have purposely retained the vagueness of some terms in the preaching vision: “gathering” (how many make a “gathering” and how often should they gather?), “worship” (what constitutes “worship?”), “leader” (what office of the church does a “leader” occupy?), and so forth.

⁵ Again, by “pericope,” I only intend a small, preachable portion of Scripture. To a great extent, what is preachable will depend on the preacher. Too narrow a slice will result in texts with theological thrusts not very different from each other week by week; too large a section will result in the specific theological thrusts of individual texts being overlooked.

thrust of the text—what the author is *doing*—can one ever move to valid application. This thrust I labeled the theology of the pericope. So here’s our scheme:



Figure 2: From text to application

The theological thrust of the text (then) has to be transposed to the audience (now). This is our lot as preachers, because this is what modern audiences cannot easily catch. A vast gap between the “then” of the text and the “now” of the audience renders the thrust of the text difficult to apprehend. That’s where preachers come in. With the hermeneutic that I propose, I see this as the primary role of the preacher: the communication of the theological thrust of the text to listeners.

For starters, then, we must reconceive the role of preachers. I propose the analogy of a curator or docent guiding visitors in an art museum through a series of paintings. Each pericope is a picture, the preacher is the curator, and the sermon is a curating of the text-picture and its thrust for the congregants, gallery visitors. A sermon is thus more a demonstration of the theological thrust of the text than an argument validating a proposition. A creative exegesis of the text is undertaken in the pulpit with a view to portraying for listeners what the author is *doing*. The sermon thus unveils the author’s agenda (pericopal theology), and the preacher is primarily a curator of a text. This is the key responsibility of the preacher, to discern and to describe the theology of the pericope.

Thomas Long suggests, in similar fashion, that the preacher is a “witness” of the text and to the text. The witness-preacher is “one who sees and experiences and tells the truth about what has been seen and experienced.”⁶ The preacher is trustworthy, not because of position, office, or status, but because of what has been seen and experienced, as this one “prayerfully goes to listen to the Bible on behalf of the people and then speaks on Christ’s behalf what she or he hears there.”⁷ The verb “to witness” has the dual sense that cor-

⁶ Thomas G. Long, “The Distance We Have Traveled: Changing Trends in Preaching,” in *A Reader on Preaching: Making Connections*, ed. David Day, Jeff Astley, and Leslie J. Francis (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 16.

⁷ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 47, 52.

responds to this twofold responsibility of the preacher. Firstly, “to witness” means to see/experience—to take something in. Secondly, “to witness” also means to speak about what one has seen/experienced—to give something out. The preacher is thus a personal witness *of* the text and its *doings*, and then a public witness *to* the text and its *doings*. “The move from text to sermon is a move from beholding to attesting, from seeing to saying, from listening to telling, from perceiving to testifying, from *being* a witness to *bearing* witness.”⁸ And in so witnessing, the theology of the pericope will have been apprehended, first by the preacher, and then by those to whom the sermon is preached. Preaching is *communicational*.

PREACHING IS THEOLOGICAL

“Biblical preaching . . . is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture, *discerned by theological exegesis . . .*”

A few months ago, on an evening of torrential rain, I was turning into the alley behind my townhome, ready to pull into the garage. That’s when I saw a utility truck parked right in front of my garage door. I stopped. I flashed my headlamps. I honked. I waved. I pointed. All to no effect. In the downpour, the driver couldn’t make anything of my frantic gesticulations. And as for the flashing and honking, he must have figured: “There’s enough room in this alley for another car to drive by. Why should I move? This guy can squeeze by.”

I was stuck. I didn’t have an umbrella. And I didn’t want to get soaked to the skin by going out and approaching the truck. That’s when I had a brainwave. I punched that button under my rear-view mirror that remotely operates the garage door. Garage door opens. Truck driver nods. Utility vehicle reverses. And yours truly drives in, all safe and dry.

Now if I were to ask, “What did I do?” you might answer in a number of ways. You might say that the motor cortex of my brain initiated a signal that went down the spinal cord to the anterior horn cells at levels C4–C8 and T1 and thence to the muscles of my shoulder, arm, and hand that, in response to those signals, contracted. Or you might say that I opened my garage door. Then again, you might say that I successfully communicated to the truck driver my intent—that I wanted to get into the garage in front of which he was parked, and that he should move.

What did I do? From the point of view of the “listener,” the one

⁸ Ibid., 100.

applying my communication—i.e., the truck driver—surely it was the last of those three options. My signal bore an implicit requirement of that individual: “Move!” The driver caught the thrust (“theology”) of my action and responded appropriately by backing away from his station. As far as the driver, i.e., the “reader” or “applier,” was concerned, this is what I, the “author” of that communication, was *doing*. That was the valid application I, the communicator, was trying to provoke.

The same distinctions operate in the analysis of biblical texts. One might interpret the Bible in many ways, that is to say, for a variety of purposes: to construct a systematic theology or to lay out a biblical theology or to reconstruct the events behind the text. But when we interpret the text *for preaching*—and I stress that preaching is what we are dealing with here, not other legitimate uses of Scripture—we must focus on what the author is *doing* in that specific text (its theology), in order to elicit a particular response from readers. Without catching this important intermediary, pericopal theology, valid application is impossible.

Thus, a text is not an end in itself, but is the means to an end. It projects an ideal vision of life: the *world in front of the text*. For instance, the author of 1 Samuel 17 was projecting an ideal world for readers (as we saw in the second article⁹), a world in which inhabitants abandon reliance upon worldly stature, resources, and experience to engage in battle for God. And readers are being invited to dwell in such ideal worlds, abiding by the values of those worlds. To live in that world is to abide by the values of that world as displayed by that pericope. A new world is projected, an invitation to that ideal world is extended, and lives are changed as listeners respond and inhabit God’s ideal world by living by the requirements of that realm.

So what is crucial for us preachers is first to grasp the thrust of the text, what the author is *doing* with what he is saying, i.e., the theology of the pericope. All texts contain literary and stylistic traces of authors’ agendas, evidence pointing the authors’ *doings*, signs that lead to the discovery of pericopal theology. Such clues can be discerned only by careful reading of the text and discovered at the level of exegesis—*theological exegesis*. Preaching is *theological*.

TRADITIONAL HOMILETICS

But this is not the way traditional homiletics (or traditional biblical

⁹ Kuruvilla, “Christiconic Interpretation,” 137–43.

scholarship) has operated. Long expressed the angst of the preacher incisively:

Conscientious biblical preachers have long shared the little secret that the classical text-to-sermon exegetical methods produce far more chaff than wheat. If one has the time and patience to stay at the chores of exegesis, theoretically one can find out a great deal of background information about virtually every passage in the Bible, much of it unfortunately quite remote from any conceivable use in a sermon. The preacher's desk can quickly be covered with Ugaritic parallels and details about syncretistic religion in the Phrygian region of Asia Minor. It is hard to find fault here; every scrap of data is potentially valuable, and it is impossible to know in advance which piece of information is to be prized. So, we brace ourselves for the next round of exegesis by saying that it is necessary to pan a lot of earth to find a little gold, and that is true, of course. However, preachers have the nagging suspicion that there is a good deal of wasted energy in the traditional model of exegesis or, worse, that the real business of exegesis is excavation and earth-moving and that any homiletical gold stumbled over along the way is largely coincidental.¹⁰

I call this the hermeneutic of excavation—the exegetical turning over of tons of earth, debris, rock, boulder, and gravel in a style of interpretation that yields an overload of biblical and Bible-related information, most of it unfortunately of little use for one seeking to preach a relevant message from a specific text. And then all of this material that is dug up from the text is reduced to points and propositions and principles, which are then preached. Sermon preparation, it was taught (and still is), was the fitting together of these assortments of points distilled from Scripture.

No wonder Fred Craddock wryly observed, “The minister boils off all the water and then preaches the stain in the bottom of the cup.”¹¹ Indeed, the approach of traditional homiletics, with its points and propositions, may even imply that once one has gotten the distillate of the text—i.e., the coffee-stain, the reduction of the text into propositions and principles—one can abandon the text itself. In fact, a recent study Bible seems to imply exactly that, as it proclaims its utility. Its publisher contends that this product “complements” the English text of the Bible “by elaborating on 1,500 principles in Scripture that are as relevant today as when the sixty-six books of the Bible were written. Distilling these truths into principles . . . helps the reader more easily remember and effective-

¹⁰ Thomas G. Long, “The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Preaching,” *Interpretation* 44 (1990): 343–44.

¹¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 123.

ly apply the Bible’s wisdom to everyday life.”¹² Boiling off the water and preaching the stain!

Here’s an example: “A Principle to Live By: #32 [from Genesis 22].” According to the author, “We should not be surprised when God allows unique tests to come into our lives to enable us to become more mature in our Christian experience.”¹³ That’s it? All that detail about Abraham and Isaac and sacrifice simply to warn us of coming tests in our lives? Did we really need Genesis 22 to tell us that? James 1 in the New Testament would have been quite sufficient. This kind of propositionalization and principlization is not only faulty, but potentially dangerous. Let’s look at the text of Genesis 22 and see if we can catch what the author is *doing*.

GENESIS 22 AND THE AUTHOR’S *DOINGS*¹⁴

The narrative of Genesis 22 begins with Abraham being asked to “go forth” (הֵלֵךְ־הֵלֵךְ), a rather unusual Hebrew phrase that occurs only twice in Genesis—both times uttered by God, and both times addressed to Abraham. The last time Abraham had heard this phrase, “Go forth,” was in Genesis 12:1.¹⁵ At that time, God commanded him:

Go forth from your country → your people → your father’s house.

Now in Genesis 22:2 the second command to “go forth” is similar—it, too, has three parts:

Go forth and take your son → your only son → the one you love.

Both in structure and concept, the test in Genesis 22 is strikingly similar to the “test” in Genesis 12:1–7. The command in Genesis 12 is the first time God spoke to the patriarch; the command in Genesis 22 is the last. Both speeches contain the same command,

¹² See “Life Essentials Study Bible,” accessed February 1, 2015, <http://www.bhpublishinggroup.com/books/products.asp?p=9781586400453>.

¹³ *Life Essentials Study Bible: Biblical Principles to Live By*, ed. Gene A. Getz (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2011), 32.

¹⁴ For further details, see Abraham Kuruvilla, “The *Aqedah*: What Is the Author *Doing* with What He Is *Saying*?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55 (2012): 489–508.

¹⁵ “Abraham” is, of course, “Abram” in Genesis 12, but for ease of expression his final name (and that of his wife, “Sarah,” not “Sarai”) will be used throughout.

found nowhere else in the Bible, and both stress a journey, an altar, and promised blessings. Thus Genesis 12 and 22 form an appropriate commencement and conclusion, respectively, of the Abrahamic saga. In the earlier call, Abraham was asked to sacrifice his country, his clan, his family—his past. Now in his final call, he is asked to sacrifice his son—his future. A burnt offering. Trial by fire—God’s fire! “How important am I to you? Sacrifice your son, your only son, the one you love.” While *we* know this was only a test, Abraham was completely in the dark: “Why are you doing this to me, O God?” And we, readers, cannot but echo that thought: Was it really necessary? And why this test now?

The narrative of Genesis 22 begins with a time stamp: “Now it came about *after these things*, that God tested Abraham” (v. 1). What exactly were “these things” that necessitated such an excruciating test? A review of Abraham’s life till this point is helpful for arriving at what the narrator was *doing* with what he was saying.

Yes, Abraham showed faith in stepping out as commanded in Genesis 12, but one notices that he took along Lot, his nephew, even though the divine word called for a separation from relatives and father’s house. Was Abraham thinking of Lot as the likely heir through whom would come the posterity that God had spoken about (12:2), seeing that he himself was already seventy-five years old, and his wife sixty-five (12:4)? That certainly was not an attitude of faith in God’s promise. Later, perhaps still holding onto the hope that his nephew Lot would be the chosen heir, Abraham gave him the choicest portion of the land; Lot went east and Abraham west (13:10–11). God appeared to Abraham soon thereafter, renewing the promise to his descendants (13:16), as if to assert that he, Abraham, had been mistaken in his reckoning of Lot as his heir. The patriarch *was* wrong, for the descendants of Lot would become enemies of the descendants of Abraham (19:38).

Soon after he left his father’s household and homeland, as Abraham stepped into the Negev, his caravan was hit by a famine (12:9–10). He promptly decamped to Egypt “to sojourn there,” despite the fact that Yahweh had just appeared to him and promised, “To your descendants I will give this land,” upon which Abraham had immediately built an altar (12:7). So he appears to be somewhat faithless in his fleeing to Egypt during the famine. Did he not trust God to keep his promise? Of course, one knows what happened in that land of refuge: Abraham was willing to pass off his wife, Sarah, as his sister, lest he be killed by Pharaoh for that “very beautiful” woman (12:12–14). How would he have the seed God promised, were he to be killed? Would not God keep his word? Why then did he have to worry about his own life and even put his

wife's well-being in jeopardy?

In Genesis 15, Yahweh's promise to Abraham was renewed (v. 1). But Abraham was still childless, and so the heir, the patriarch figured, had to be Eliezer, his steward (vv. 2–3). God was quick to negate that suggestion: Abraham's heir would be "one who shall come forth from your own body" (v. 4), a promise set forth in covenant form (vv. 5–21).

Yet Sarah continued to remain barren (16:1). Abraham then resorted to a compromise. Perhaps the chosen heir, "from your own body," was to come through the maternal agency of a concubine (v. 2). Acting on this misconception, Abraham fathered Ishmael through Hagar, the Egyptian. God reappeared to Abraham in Genesis 17 and once again spelled out his promise to the patriarch. The divine word was crystal clear: *Sarah* would be the mother of the heir (this was stated thrice here: 17:16, 19, 21), not the maid, Hagar. And just as in the case of Lot, Ishmael's descendants (25:12–18) would turn out to be enemies of the descendants of Abraham. Again, faithlessness characterized Abraham's response to God.

Then, to make matters worse, in Genesis 20, Abraham palmed his wife off as his sister—again!—this time to Abimelech (v. 2), but for the same reason that he had conducted his subterfuge in Genesis 12—out of fear for his own life (20:11), and this despite the extended account of Yahweh's appearance and re-promise to Abraham and his wife that an heir would be born to them (18:10–13). As in Genesis 12, God had to intervene to set things straight (20:6–7).

Thus, all along, Abraham is seen rather clumsily stumbling along in his faith. All of his attempts to help God out with the production of a heir had come to naught. None of his schemes had worked; in fact, they had only created more trouble for himself and, in the future, for his descendants. Genesis 12–21, then, is not the account of a pristine faith on the part of the patriarch.

And then in Genesis 22, Abraham is tested. It is almost as if this test was a necessary one. Had Abraham learned his lesson? Would he come around to realizing, finally, that God was faithful? Would he now acknowledge that even against all odds and despite all unfavorable circumstances God's promises *would* come to pass? A test was necessary—not for God's benefit, of course, but for Abraham's, and for the benefit of all succeeding generations of readers of the text, to demonstrate what it meant to trust God fully, to take him at his word.

ABRAHAM'S FEAR OF GOD

Notice, near the end of the story, the key phrase in the acclamation of the angel of Yahweh: "Now I know that you *fear God*" (Gen.

22:12). Abraham's fear of God had, through this test, been proven. This "fearing of God" is a critical element in the account. 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 "fear of God" in the Bible: *יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים* in 20:11; and *יִרְא אֱלֹהִים* in 22:12). In the first instance, when Abimelech confronted Abraham with his wife/sister deception, Abraham's excuse was, "Surely there is no fear [*יִרְאַת*] of God in this place; and they will kill me because of my wife" (20:11). Hearing the patriarch's excuse, "No fear of God in this place," the reader is immediately struck by the irony. Abimelech was in fact terror-stricken at the possibility of having run up against God; the text explicitly tells us so: "And the men were greatly frightened [*וַיִּירָאוּ . . . מְאֹד*]" (20:8). On the other hand, it was *Abraham* who did not fear God enough to trust him to take care of him when God had promised him descendants. Surely his life would not be in danger before he produced progeny.

But now here in Genesis 22, Abraham appears to have learned his lesson in trusting God as indicated in his response to Isaac: "Yahweh will provide" (v. 8). It seems clear that Genesis 21, with the birth of Isaac and Yahweh's triple assertion of his faithfulness (vv. 1–2), had something to do with that change of heart. Apparently, after many blunders and fumbles, with the birth of Isaac Abraham had finally come around to trusting God, for God *had* kept his word. And in Genesis 22, the divine declaration "Now I know that you fear God" (v. 12) confirmed the fact that Abraham now feared God, trusting him enough to obey him without question. Surely a God who could give him an heir from a dead womb could bring back that one from a charred altar. No wonder God could affirm Abraham's fear of God after this momentous test. Indeed, this was a sacrifice not of Isaac, but of Abraham himself—all he hoped for, his future, his life, his seed. Thus the Aqedah defines the "fear of God" as faithful obedience that holds back *nothing* from God.

ABRAHAM'S LOVE FOR ISAAC

The extent of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice "everything" and the depth of his wholehearted obedience are indicated in Genesis 22 by the emphasis on the father-son relationship: אב, "father," or בן, son, are mentioned twelve times in verses 1–20 (in 22:2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16). Readers are never to forget the relationship. In the only conversation recorded in the Bible between Abraham and Isaac, the latter's words begin with "my father" and the former's words end with "my son" (vv. 7–8)—this is also Abraham's last word before he prepares to slay Isaac (בְּנִי, "my son," is a single word in Hebrew). The narrator is explicitly creating an emotional

tension in the story; one thing is painfully clear: a father is called to slay the son he loves.

It is therefore highly significant that the first time the word “love” (אהב) occurs in the Bible is in this account, in 22:2. With the entry of this new word into Scripture came an implicit question: Was Abraham’s love for Isaac so strong that his allegiance to God had diminished? It appears, then, that this love of Abraham for Isaac was a crucial element in the test; it was this love that was being tested. Would Abraham be loyal to God, fearing him, or would love for the human overpower trust in the divine?

Without even perusing the details of Abraham’s test, one can find the answer to that question of Abraham’s loyalties when one compares the descriptors of Isaac. There are three heavenly announcements to Abraham (22:1–2, 11–12, 14–16) with three corresponding descriptors of the (proposed/putative) sacrifice, Isaac. These three descriptors contain three of the ten instances of בן (“son”) in the account; these three alone are inflected with the second person singular possessive pronoun “your” (בנך, “your son”) and fitted into a patterned construction. However, there is a significant alteration, before and after the test, in how God and the angel of Yahweh describe Isaac.

Pre-test:

22:2 “your son, your only son, *the one you love*”

Post-test:

22:12 “your son, your only son”

22:16 “your son, your only son”

The omission of “the one you love” in the post-test acclamations of 22:12 and 16 helps clarify the reason for the test in the first place. The trifold description of Isaac in verse 2 was to emphasize that this son, this particular one, was the one Abraham *loved*, with a love that potentially stood in the way of his allegiance to, and faith in, or fear of, God. The subsequent, post-test deletion of the phrase “the one you love” was clear indication that Abraham had passed the examination. The three-part description of Isaac *before* the test (“son/only son/the one you love”) becomes, *after* the test, two-part (“son/only son”). The Aqedah was, in reality, a demonstration of love for God over and against anything that advanced a rival claim to that love.¹⁶

¹⁶ The equation of “fear of God” and “love for God” is not illegitimate: Deuteronomy 6:2 and 13 command fear, while the *Shema* calls for love (6:5); and see Deuteronomy

ISAAC'S DISAPPEARANCE

One element of the account that has perplexed interpreters is the apparent disappearance of Isaac from the Abraham stories after the mention of "son" in Genesis 22:16. Indeed, father and son are never shown speaking to each other again after this narrative; Isaac does not even show up in the account of Sarah's death and burial (Gen. 23). The only mentioned "contact" between father and son after the stunning episode of the Aqedah is at Abraham's funeral (25:9). In fact, in Genesis 22 itself, it appears that Isaac, right after the aborted sacrifice, has vanished. Abraham, we are told, returned from his test, apparently *without* Isaac: "So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba" (22:19). Where was Isaac?

After the test, it is as if Isaac altogether vanished; the narrator apparently took an eraser and wiped out any mention of Isaac after the "sacrifice." But there was a purpose behind this: the author was *doing* something with what he was saying (in this case, with what he *failed* to say, creating a striking gap in the narrative, but that, too, is to "say" something). No more would the Abraham narrative portray father and son speaking to each other or even being in one another's presence until the older one died (25:8–9). When one remembers that the test was an examination of Abraham's loyalties—whether to God or to son, "the one you love"—one understands what the author was *doing* in Genesis 22:19. He was describing, in yet another way, Abraham's success in this critical test. The author was depicting a line drawn; the relationship between father and son had been clarified, the tension between fear of God and love of son had been resolved. One might almost say: *For Abraham so loved God that he gave his only begotten son . . .* This test had shown that Abraham loved God more than anyone else. 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.¹⁷ He was *doing* something with what he was saying.

"What, then, does Abraham teach us? To put it briefly, he teaches us not to prefer the gifts of God to God. . . . Therefore, put not even a real gift of God before the Giver of that gift" (Augustine,

10:12 and 13:3–4—each has both elements. Also see Deuteronomy 10:20 with 11:1 as well as Psalms 31:19, 23; and 145:19–20. There is considerable overlap between the two concepts of fear and love, as is evident in the Aqedah itself.

¹⁷ As to whether they were *actually* separated, that is an issue *behind* the text that need not concern the interpreter for preaching purposes.

Serm. 2). Thus the intent of the author was to call for an identification of the readers with the protagonist of this story—Abraham, the paragon of faith in God/fear of God. God’s people everywhere are to exercise the kind of faith in God that Abraham exercised, the kind of love for God that Abraham demonstrated, the kind of fear of God that Abraham exhibited: nothing comes between God and the believer. *Nothing!* This is what the author was *doing*; this is the lesson the preacher must proclaim; this is what the reader must apply.

This is quite a far cry from “A Principle to Live By: #32 [from Genesis 22]: We should not be surprised when God allows unique tests to come into our lives to enable us to become more mature in our Christian experience.”

EVENTS AND WORLDS

Thus a text may not only tell the reader about the world *behind* the text—what actually happened: the story of a man, his son, a ram, the angel of Yahweh, and God (Gen. 22). The text also projects another ideal world *in front of* itself that bids the reader inhabit it, a world characterized by certain values—the theology of the pericope, what the author is *doing* with what he is saying. This is what must be preached. All that to say, we must attend closely to the text, privileging it and preaching its theology.

With the hermeneutic I propose, preaching is not so much argumentation as it is a demonstration—with the preacher as curate or witness—of the theology of the pericope. No more boiling down the text and preaching the stain! Instead we are to be curating or witnessing the word of God to the people of God, so that their lives may be changed for the glory of God. The preacher is a facilitating intermediary who enables listeners to catch the theology of the text—what the author is *doing* with what he is saying in the particular pericope. This demonstration of the theology of the text is the primary task of the preacher.¹⁸

The next, and final, article will close out the implications of this vision for preaching.

¹⁸ Of course, there is also a secondary task the preacher has in the role of pastor, spiritual director, elder, parent-figure: that is to provide specific application. That preaching is applicational will be discussed in the next article in this series.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.