

RESPONSE TO ABRAHAM KURUVILLA, “WHAT IS THE AUTHOR *DOING* WITH WHAT HE IS *SAYING*?” PRAGMATICS AND PREACHING—AN APPEAL!¹

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Abstract: Kuruvilla's approach to preaching offers important lessons for teachers of exegesis, lessons about not losing sight of the larger point of a biblical text and finding its valid application for today by looking for the author's theological thrust, that is, what an author is doing with what he is saying. This effort to see the “world in front of the text” as shown by literary clues in the text itself can help to deliver interpreters from getting lost in less important details about the text itself or the “world behind the text.” But his emphasis on literary features of the text on its own seems to neglect information about the life setting of the original author and readers that can be important for sound interpretation.

Key words: *exegesis, application, preaching, pragmatics, homiletics, hermeneutics, Greek, Hebrew*

“This was the best paper I’ve heard at this conference!” was the comment I overheard last November as Abraham Kuruvilla concluded his presentation at the New Testament Greek Language and Exegesis session in San Antonio. As one of the steering committee members responsible for inviting Dr. Kuruvilla to participate, I want to express again our gratitude for his lively and engaging contribution to that session, and I am happy that his ideas will gain a wider currency through publication in *JETS*. Agreeing to respond to his paper is a further expression of how much I admire his seasoned experience and effectiveness as a preacher of Scripture and value the influence of his ideas in helping others to proclaim God’s word faithfully. As made clear in his article, the session’s topic was Greek exegesis and preaching. In what follows I will respond to his article with both affirmations and hesitations regarding what it says about the teaching and practice of exegesis and how it contributes to preaching and teaching in the church. The final section will give recommendations for teaching exegesis that arise from this dialogue.

I. AFFIRMATIONS

As I listened to Kuruvilla’s presentation and then read through it again, I found myself responding repeatedly with a heartfelt, “Yes, but . . . !” I want to survey very quickly some areas of agreement and then give my reservations about what he has written. First, I strongly affirm his point that application to life is a primary

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function of Scripture, and those who preach or teach it in the church must give their best efforts to ensuring that their listeners respond with obedience and faith to what God says to them in the text. Lives lived in conformity to Scripture should be the result of our ministry of preaching.²

My second affirmation is closely related: what is needed is *valid* application of the text, a call for attitudes and conduct that are clearly warranted by Scripture itself in the text under consideration. The preacher's own counsel or guidelines for life however well intended, if they are imposed on the text rather than drawn from it, do not constitute faithful preaching of Scripture. I strongly agree that what is needed is an approach to application that allows the text to speak afresh to our situation—that “privileges the text,” to copy the title of one of Kuruvilla's other works on preaching.³ We want to handle the Scripture in such a way that we find what God is calling his people to in his written word.

The third affirmation is that valid application does not come automatically; it requires careful attention and seasoned discernment. Unfortunately, examples of application gone awry are easy to find—we all have our humorous (or not so humorous) illustrations of misapplication (sometimes in our own earlier sermons or lessons). Likewise debates over what conduct and practices are actually warranted by Scripture are with us constantly, and clear-cut answers are elusive. We could wish for a definitive process that eliminates all dispute or confusion, but that too is elusive. Preachers must do their best with the Spirit's guidance to discover valid applications from Scripture, but such work will always be imperfect.

A further part of this third affirmation is my agreement with Kuruvilla that our Christian colleges and seminaries must do a better job of equipping future preachers to study and apply Scripture faithfully. There is often a gap between exegesis and preaching departments that leaves students floundering at the critical point of moving judiciously from what the text *meant* when it was written to what it *means* now for Christian living. Exegetical specialists do their thing with students in their courses and homiletics specialists likewise, but how much integration is there between the two? Is the student the only one who is expected to figure out how to bring the two together? I think this gap can be overstated,⁴ but I acknowledge that more should be done to help aspiring preachers and teachers to handle this critical task skillfully.

My fourth area of agreement with Kuruvilla is to acknowledge the importance of exploring the pragmatics of biblical texts (what the authors are doing) as well as

² In addition to what Kuruvilla says here, I recommend his book *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015) for a compelling and comprehensive picture of what biblical preaching can be and how it can serve God's people in our churches.

³ *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013).

⁴ Kuruvilla cites Barth, Hengel, Long, Smart, and Vanhoozer at various points in support of such a gap, but their critiques are directed primarily at exegesis as done by liberal historical critics who consciously limit themselves to “what the text meant” or worse, “what sources and stages existed behind the text in its present state.” I believe evangelical OT or NT scholars feel a much greater call to help students see the contemporary relevance of Scripture.

their semantics (what the authors are saying). This includes an appreciation for the implicit, inferable information that is communicated along with the overt statements, stories, psalms, and so forth of Scripture. I also agree with his conviction that the pragmatics of a text must be discerned by paying attention to its semantics—they are separable but not independent. While I agree with these points and see their value for interpretation and application, I am not as confident as he is that pragmatics holds the key to valid application.⁵ I am also resistant to his portrayal of this distinction as something that “traditional” exegesis was unaware of and as representative of the “new” way that is, of course, superior to the “old” way. What is old is not automatically inferior; what is new is not automatically superior; in fact, it is not always even so new.⁶

Fifth, I want to affirm the potential of seeking the “world in front of the text,” properly understood, as a guide to valid application of Scripture. To look for the world of human life lived in vibrant relation to God that a biblical text refers to is an intriguing and inspiring way to conceive of preaching the Bible and leading our listeners to live it out passage by passage. I see the potential of this approach, but I am hesitant about some aspects of it and I am not convinced that it delivers what Kuruvilla seems to promise from it. More about this in the next section.

II. HESITATIONS

My reservations about Kuruvilla’s approach center around our shared concern to “privilege the text” in our interpretation and preaching of Scripture. This is what we both agree is needed, but I wonder if his approach is the best way to accomplish the task. The first hesitation I have focuses on the intellectual lineage of Kuruvilla’s concept of “the world in front of the text” and how it affects his approach to the text itself. Some have taken Paul Ricoeur’s “world in front of the text” as license to detach the meaning of a text from its author and impose new meanings created by the reader, whose new point of view and set of values are determinative in forming “the world in front of the text.”⁷ Ricoeur himself speaks about the independence of the written text (as opposed to a spoken utterance) from its author and original set of circumstances: “writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author. What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant. . . . [The text] transcends its own psycho-

⁵ We should remember also that one of the “speech acts” authors perform in texts is to produce a comprehension of what is said, which then may lead to some response (acceptance of its truth, appropriate action as a consequence, etc.). Pragmatics or “what an author is doing” is not limited to the consequent conduct. See Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 98–103; Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!* 110–13.

⁶ I believe that in this regard, as in many others, capable exegetes and preachers of previous generations were sensitive to such things even if they were unconscious of them and were not privy to our specialized labels for them.

⁷ E.g., W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2, 190, 298.

sociological conditions of production and thereby opens itself up to an unlimited series of readings.” He clarifies later that understanding the text is “*to understand oneself in front of the text*. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self.”⁸ I take Kuruvilla at his word that his own focus is the *author* who speaks and acts in the text, and the meaning that the author invested in the text takes priority over what the reader brings to it.⁹ But I am concerned about others who may nuance this paradigm in a different way. I also wonder if emphasis on “the world in front of the text” has influenced Kuruvilla’s focus on literary features in the text and his relative neglect or even disparagement of work with the ancient historical and cultural context of the author and his original audience. See comments below on what he calls “a hermeneutic of excavation.”

My second hesitation about Kuruvilla’s approach is that it strikes me as rather abstract, theoretical, and vague. It is well and good to highlight “what the author is doing” with what he is saying or the theological “thrust” of a biblical text. And the illustrations of pragmatic inference drawn from immediate experiences of spoken language (“the trash is full”; “you are standing on my foot”) convincingly show the value of pragmatics for understanding how the listener should respond. But how easily do such experiences transfer to handling ancient written texts? Kuruvilla’s illustrations from Scripture (Mark 14 and 16; Gen 22) help to flesh out the kind of careful attention to literary features of a text that can be valuable. But the textual evidence for his reading of what the authors are doing in those texts (e.g., co-occurrence of certain lexical items in distant texts; absence of certain phrasing as the story moves along) strikes me as a bit thin. These may be significant textual clues for discerning the central thrusts of these texts, but if such mainly literary considerations form the central basis for valid application of these passages, I wonder how confident any preacher can be about application.¹⁰

In his emphasis on the text’s literary features and in his approach to the issue of how to move from the specifics of the ancient text to trans-cultural truths for human life today, Kuruvilla relies in part on a further element of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic, the “distanciation” of written texts from their original author, audience, and compositional setting. In Ricoeur’s view, preserving utterances in written form

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 139, 143 (italics his). See also his *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 29–30.

⁹ See Abraham Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (LNTS 393; London: T & T Clark, 2009), 22, 27–28; and his *Privilege the Text!* 33–43. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Reader in New Testament Interpretation,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 309–10, who understands Ricoeur ultimately to prioritize the text over its readers. The term “author” throughout this response (following Kuruvilla) is shorthand for the divine-human authorship of Scripture.

¹⁰ Admittedly, two examples may not demonstrate the full potential of an approach. Kuruvilla’s commentaries on Genesis, Judges, Mark, and Ephesians as well as his treatment of other texts in his book *Privilege the Text* may provide more help in discerning how textual clues lead to valid application.

makes the text available for other audiences and opens it up for new interpretations, especially more universal or trans-historical readings no longer restricted to the particulars of the original situation. The written text is thus automatically decontextualized so that it can be recontextualized in new situations.¹¹ This has at least two consequences for interpretation that make me hesitant. First, the text itself, especially its literary features as a text, assumes a larger importance for discerning the meaning (both semantic and pragmatic), and information available to us about the author, the original readers, their specific situation, or the larger historical-cultural-religious world in which they lived is regarded as rather unimportant or even unnecessary for interpretation. The text itself as a literary artifact is what is important, not anything “behind the text.” And second, reading the text as somewhat independent from the specifics of its original setting is assumed de facto to universalize its meaning. “The world in front of the text” that we are invited to live in today appears almost effortlessly, without the frustrating complications of pondering specifically the text’s meaning in its ancient setting and then moving responsibly to what it means for us. Kuruvilla refers early in his article to the “black box” where unseen magical processes take us from text to sermon but no one can explain what happens inside the box. I have the same impression in trying to follow how to discover “the world in front of the text” according to his approach. It gives a win-some and compelling vision but not enough specifics of how to reach the goal.

Far better, it seems to me, to engage the details of the text as the author has written it in light of the original situation, and try to surface and evaluate the specific clues in the text that point to concepts, attitudes, and conduct that transcend that setting. The more overt and conscious this process is—as opposed to intuitive or mysterious—the better. Many evangelical works on hermeneutics, exegesis, or preaching do what I regard to be a fine job of walking a preacher through this process.¹² I think Kuruvilla’s critique of such ideas is unconvincing,¹³ and his own approach is too abstract and seemingly automatic to provide a better alternative.

¹¹ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 139–44; Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis*, 20–26.

¹² E.g., William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 602–36; Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 784–800; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 410–56; Mark L. Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times: Understanding and Applying God’s Word Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 207–44; Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 50–84.

¹³ Kuruvilla’s objections to looking for universal principles in the text (in e.g., *Privilege the Text!* 127–29) are that (1) this represents an attempt to boil all of Scripture’s genres down to one (i.e., propositional or didactic); and (2) it requires searching behind the text rather than in the text to find what the author intended. Reading the works cited in the preceding note will, I think, show these objections to be invalid. We can appreciate the rich variety of literature in Scripture and still ponder what its trans-cultural message is in and through various genres. Also, to look for the universal truth expressed in the text is not to get behind the text but to probe the text itself for “what the author is doing with what he is saying” (see the fourth area of agreement noted above).

My third hesitation, already alluded to, is Kuruvilla's relative neglect of how important the ancient setting is for biblical interpretation (for what an author *says* as well as what he *does* in the text). If we are to read the textual clues for what is said explicitly as well as for what is implied, we must examine the text's extra-linguistic context, not just its features as a text orphaned from its original setting. This is of course part of the difficulty of reading ancient texts—the gap in time, culture, world-view and so forth that exists between us and the text's author and first readers. Many of the shared features of life and situation that aided their greater ease of communication are lost to us and we must work to overcome that deficit. So we seek ancient language competency but also awareness of other facets of material and conceptual life that often figure in textual understanding. It is true that we share a common humanity with the ancient audience, and our existence as creatures subject to God is parallel to theirs. Also, much of what we might otherwise be unaware of is often supplied at least in basic form by the texts themselves—the relevant features of local circumstances and cultural patterns sometimes appear clearly enough to fill us in. Our problems lie especially in the pragmatic or inferred meanings that must be understood from what the text says. As Kuruvilla rightly points out, relevance theory has made us more sensitive to the features of meaning that are shared between author and readers and are thus inferable from what is said. For efficiency, not all of those features need to be stated overtly; they can be understood within the framework of the participants' shared world. But without some grasp of the ancient environment, modern readers will unconsciously construct meaning from their own cultural assumptions.¹⁴ We read about “success” in Joshua 1 or “freedom” in Galatians 5 and picture a world in front of the text that is rich in possessions and status or where we are autonomous individuals free to define our own identities without external constraints. The semantics and pragmatics of a text must be construed in light of the literary context as well as the extra-literary context, that is, the specific circumstances of the text and the broader world of the ancient author and readers. This must not be neglected in our search for the text's meaning and application.

The fourth and final hesitation relates to my fourth area of agreement with Kuruvilla noted above. We affirm that attention to both semantics and pragmatics of textual meaning is important and that a text's pragmatic meaning must be discovered by paying attention to its semantic meaning. Semantic meaning in turn involves more than just word studies or observing literary patterns; it includes grammatical meanings, syntactical relationships of phrases and sentences, information flow and prominence, and attention to the larger point that is communicated amid the details. This leads me to contend that even for preachers (not just for academic specialists) solid competence in the original languages is essential. Thus, I

¹⁴ Gene L. Green, “Relevance Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 237–39.

am hesitant, even resistant, to the idea that preachers need only enough language ability to use commentaries and software.¹⁵

Faithful preaching must center on the Bible and this requires doing all that is necessary to allow the text itself to speak in fresh ways in our churches and in our lives. Sermons based on study of the English alone or on following a consensus of the better commentaries or the sermons of others can only be regarded as second best. One of the most important skills of exegesis is the ability to sort through competing interpretations, understand where they come from, learn along the way from the insights of others, and arrive at a level of conviction about the more likely, textually justifiable reading. Good interpretation comes from asking the right questions about meaning, making a series of judgments about those, and coming to conclusions that allow the text itself to provide the best answers. It cannot be based on mere intuition, good hunches, or personal whim, and it cannot be grounded on work with English versions alone or a superficial knowledge of the original language. How can preachers learn to evaluate options judiciously if they have no first-hand experience with the exegetical processes that commentaries deal with (word studies, syntax, etc.)? This is not a matter of reinventing the wheel; it involves learning how to think about meaning and apply focused analysis to the textual features that will bring the best interpretive results in a given passage.

Such work certainly takes time and attention to detail, but it yields important dividends even beyond better interpretation. It yields greater confidence about what we conclude is a more faithful reading of the text, increased understanding and perhaps sympathy toward the views of others even if we disagree with them, a sharper ability to confront clear misinterpretations and show how they go wrong, and a greater passion to proclaim the truth we find in the text. Beyond preaching, a solid grounding of our convictions in biblical exegesis is important for faithful pastoral care, leadership of God's people, and witness to the wider community. All of this requires disciplined, regular immersion in Scripture, wrestling with its meaning and application in more careful ways. It is true that pastors have a lot to occupy their time and attention in ministry these days, but teaching Scripture faithfully, with clarity and conviction, and with a view to life transformation should be the center. Skillful use of the original languages in biblical interpretation is the foundation of such a ministry.¹⁶

¹⁵ Of course, it is true that original language ability by itself does not constitute competent exegesis. It is one of many skills as noted above that must be employed to allow God's truth in Scripture to be seen clearly.

¹⁶ Kuruvilla quotes Martin Hengel, "A Young Theological Discipline in Crisis," in *Earliest Christian History* (ed. Michael F. Bird and Jason Maston; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 470–71, on the need for NT interpretation to be "never a mere philological-historical task" but to seek "application and authentication in the present." But the force of Hengel's essay (cf. pp. 464, 470) is to argue strongly for both, for "two directions of vision," one occupied with the past (the NT texts in Greek and in their wider ancient contexts) and one occupied with the present and future (the significance of those texts for today). Both of these are important for preachers.

III. TEACHING EXEGESIS FOR PREACHING

In describing traditional exegetical method, Kuruvilla speaks somewhat dismissively about a “hermeneutic of excavation.”¹⁷ This is where the interpreter or preacher turns over mounds of information about or “behind” the text (e.g., textual criticism, backgrounds, authorship and occasion for the book, syntactical and lexical usage, genre, propositional outlining, etc.) before venturing to interpret or apply it. After this time-consuming process, only a scrap or two of the resulting heaps of data seems to prove significant for preaching. This is certainly a frustrating prospect and admittedly such procedures are often taught in exegesis classes without much sense of prioritization or proportion. This should be changed (see specific suggestions below).

I want to push back, however, against this negative portrayal of standard exegesis (which he himself acknowledges is a bit overdone)¹⁸ by arguing that these are exactly the processes of study that, when used appropriately, allow the text itself to speak afresh today. In our rush to find contemporary relevance we often lose our anchor in God’s word and resort to a facile “modernizing” of the Bible. We see only the questions we are preoccupied with and quickly read our concerns back into Scripture. I am not denying the vitality that we experience regularly in having the Scriptures speak with amazing relevance and power to immediate situations in our lives. I am calling, however, for greater discernment and self-awareness, and firm leadership on the part of Christian preachers and teachers, to ensure that the Bible molds our lives instead of vice versa. This requires disciplined, regular immersion in Scripture, wrestling with its meaning and application in more careful ways and of course with reverence and prayer for insight and responsiveness (Ps 1:2; Isa 66:2).

To put things in perspective, I am reminded of Robert Alter’s similar use of the word “excavative.” In an essay on literary criticism and commentaries, Alter (a skillful Jewish exponent of literary readings of the OT) refers admiringly to the early volumes of the Jewish Publication Society’s commentaries on the Pentateuch. These are filled with an overwhelming wealth of information about virtually everything that could conceivably be discovered on Genesis, Leviticus, and Numbers (archaeology, ancient Near Eastern culture and religion, comparative Semitic philology, Rabbinic interpretation, etc.). Alter calls them “excavative” but acknowledges the value such details have even for strictly literary readings of those books.¹⁹ To

¹⁷ Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!* 280; *A Vision for Preaching*, 7, 103.

¹⁸ Kuruvilla, *Vision for Preaching*, 103 n. 26: “There is, of course, a place for all of these exercises.”

¹⁹ Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 133, 139, 152; to be fair he notes that “many of the historical scholars, for their part, still need to understand better that a literary text—even an ancient and canonical one—is more than the broken pieces of a potsherd in an archaeological find to be fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle” (152).

my mind, that kind of work truly deserves the label “excavation,”²⁰ but in comparison what future preachers are asked to do in exegesis classes hardly qualifies!

Teachers of exegesis, however, must do a better job of helping students use these exegetical methods without getting overwhelmed or lost in them. Here are a few suggestions for how to do this.

III. SUGGESTIONS

1. Emphasize constantly the *pedagogical* purpose of the steps in the exegetical process and free students from any sense of obligation to follow these steps punctiliously in their later week-by-week sermon preparation. Any complicated skill consists of components that must be practiced laboriously at first but then become natural and intuitive as we gain greater experience (e.g., skiing, playing piano). Once the individual elements are mastered, the entire process is more manageable and some of the steps require less or no attention. At that point, the interpreter is better prepared to be ruthlessly selective about which components are most needed in a given passage to yield the greatest interpretive dividends. A sense of priority and proportion is needed, but that kind of judgment comes only through experience and practice.

2. Expect students to bring their detailed work with different exegetical components through to a focus on the big picture. They must learn to see the larger point, the overall thrust of the text that comes from seeing how its parts fit together. This also requires a seasoned prioritization about what is central in a given passage as over against what is peripheral. The enemy of good preaching is thinking that you need to mention everything you see in the text. Our exegetical assignments must include practice at synthesizing in this way.

3. Insist that students learn to use the best commentaries and computer tools without being slaves to them or trying to read them all point by point. These are important “conversation partners” to speed up and inform the student’s own work in the text. But the text itself must be the focus, and what the tools say must be evaluated based on the interpreter’s developing judgment about what makes the most sense of the passage. The right kind of commentaries can enrich the preacher’s grasp of all sorts of considerations that are too time-consuming to chase down on one’s own. But commentary reading must also be ruthlessly selective based on the preacher’s judgment about what will be most helpful.

4. Provide instruction and practice in articulating valid application from the text. Once exegetical exercises move to the level of working with whole passages (not individual text-critical assignments or word studies, etc.), the student cannot be allowed to traffic in ancient history: “these are the events of the story,” “this is what Paul said to the Corinthians.” Discerning what the text means for our lives today (and how it is truly based on the text) must be a significant skill that we help

²⁰ A number of recent commentaries are similarly exhaustive (and exhausting?) in their voluminous record of research on the languages, theologies, and ancient settings of biblical books.

our students develop. A further dimension of this is the need for students to work with different genres of biblical literature, and grasp the differences that come with applying narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, parables, epistles and so forth.

5. Do not allow methodical rigor to squeeze the life out of a passage. In the midst of careful work, remind students of the vibrant, life-giving character of God's word to us in Scripture. Suffocating analysis never leads to life changing preaching. On the other hand, nothing is more invigorating than seeing the message of Scripture first-hand through careful, reverent study and helping others to see it too.

We should be grateful to Kuruvilla for pointing out the need for much of what was just said about teaching and practicing exegesis. I hope it has been clear throughout this response that he and I do not disagree over the goal of exegesis and preaching but over some aspects of how it should proceed. Even in regard to method, my hesitations point not to "either-or" choices but to "both-and" matters and the comparative importance of different exegetical components that lead to sound preaching.