

Big Idea—*Requiescat in Pace!* Authorial Rejoinder to Steven Mathewson

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I am grateful to my friend, Steve Mathewson, whom I much appreciate for taking the time to peruse, reflect on, and interact with my article titled “Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching.”¹

I’d like to start right there, with my title. Notice that I had not “proposed that it is time to kill the ‘Big Idea’ approach to preaching” as Mathewson alleges.² I had only *asked* whether it may be time to do so, in an attempt to spark a conversation such as this. Indeed, my concluding sentence echoed that sentiment: “*Perhaps* it is time to change methods.”³

Mathewson also contends that “Kuruville’s criticisms do not reflect the methodology of the better practitioners of the Big Idea approach.”⁴ But I cannot think of a more representative sample of “better practitioners” than the ones I cited, and whose methodology I critiqued, among whom were Haddon Robinson (whom Mathewson labeled “the dean of big idea preaching”⁵), Donald Sunukjian, Timothy Warren, Duane Litfin, Bryan Chapell, John MacArthur, Tim Keller, and Steve Mathewson himself.⁶ And, I’m afraid, they, and the rest, sing in near-perfect unison, unanimous as they are about distilling the text and preaching the distillate.⁷

My rejoinder will be structured in three sections, Big Ideas and authorial *doings* (also dealing with three biblical pericopes—those referred to by me in my earlier article, or by

¹ Steven D. Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live! A Response to Abraham Kuruville,” *JEHS* 19.1 (2019): 33–41. Mathewson’s response, my original article, and this, my rejoinder, are all available at <http://homiletix.com/kill-the-big-idea/>. My long-standing appreciation for Steve and his preaching also prompted me to host him some time ago for an interview in my “How I Preach” series (see here: <http://homiletix.com/how-i-preach-archives/>). On another note: Since this essay has not been restricted by journal editors to a specific word count or page number, I have allowed myself more verbosity than is typical for an authorial rejoinder, in order to further a pedagogical purpose: I intend to have this set of papers read by my students for a class, “Hermeneutics in Homiletics.”

² Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 33.

³ Abraham Kuruville, “Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching,” *JETS* 61 (2018): 846 (italics added).

⁴ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 34.

⁵ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 40.

⁶ In fact, in an attempt to (re)discover the fundamentals of the Big Idea strategy, one of my latest projects involved trawling hours of video and audio archival recordings (in my possession) of mid-to-late seventies lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary by two of these “better practitioners,” Haddon Robinson and Donald Sunukjian. I’ll deploy transcribed portions of this illuminating collection in this rejoinder, referencing quotes by name of speaker, title of recording, and video/audio time stamp.

⁷ See Kuruville, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 826–28, 834–36, for the opinions of these (and other) “better practitioners.” But let there be no doubt: These worthies have done homiletics a stellar service over the decades, for which I am grateful, despite my disagreements with them on matters hermeneutical.

Mathewson in his response, or by both of us); Big Ideas and “pegs”; and Big Ideas and Bach (a summation).

Big Ideas and Authorial *Doings*?

Mathewson excuses the Big Idea operation insisting that its preachers *do* pay close attention to “the literary genre and literary artistry of the text.”⁸ Unfortunately, if they do respect textual finesse and nuance, it is only to boil everything down to a Big Idea (as they distill the text): Because, said Robinson, “the author has a concept, he has an idea, a principle he’s trying to get across” which, apparently, must be distilled out of the text.⁹ And if at all these practitioners return to the text when they preach, it is only to support and validate their derivation of the Big Idea (as they preach the distillate). Because, said Robinson, again: “I open the book [Bible] and you open your book, and I tell you that this is *how I derived it* [the Big Idea]. . . . I have laid out for you *the grounds on which I received this* [Big Idea]. . . . You give them [listeners] enough so that they can understand *where you got this* [Big Idea] *from*.”¹⁰ The use of the text in the sermon is presumably only to validate that distillate. This suggests that literary genres and artistry, and textual finesse and nuance are irrelevant once the Big Idea has been extracted (other than to substantiate, in the sermon, that preacher-generated Big Idea). That’s like boiling down a variety of foods (= genres/literary art)—fruits, veggies, meats, fish, etc., to reduce them all to their essences (= Big Ideas)—carbs, proteins, fats, etc. The foods themselves, whether they be raspberries and cheese, broccoli and bacon, *parottas* and beef fry, or *maguro (otoro!)* and rice, are only passive bearers and supporters of the “essential [Big Idea/nutrient] core,” and irrelevant to wellbeing and good health.¹¹

Mark 4:35–41 and Inattention to Pragmatics

I suspect that, fundamentally, Big Idea advocates have not understood pragmatics, authorial *doings*, and pericopal theology. But Mathewson defends Robinson as having employed pragmatics, offering an example:

Robinson observed that Mark uses a time reference (“That day when evening came,” 4:35) to link the story [of the stilling of the storm] to Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom that had taken place earlier in the day. Thus, he argued that the function of the story is to encourage believers that they have not given their lives to a lost cause. His big idea was something like: “You can be sure that the kingdom to which you have given your life will succeed because the King has unlimited power.”¹²

⁸ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 34.

⁹ “Definition 760113,” 24:28–24:41.

¹⁰ “Definition 760113,” 38:00–39:22 (emphases mine).

¹¹ Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 66. I used a similar cheeseburger analogy in my article (Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 833n40). Robinson confirms my assessment of the role of the not-so-essential text as merely a servant of the preacher-postulated Big Idea ostensibly hiding within it: “When you are looking for what we call the structure of the passage, you are trying to see how the writer *supports* or *proves* or *develops* or *applies* the subject and the complement, or the basic idea” (“Unity Order Progress 770000,” 24:50–25:12; emphases mine).

¹² Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 37. I, too, have heard Robinson propounding this interpretation in a Doctor of Ministry class that the two of us co-taught at Dallas Seminary a decade ago.

But Robinson's reasoning, like the hapless boat in the story, does not hold water. No doubt, the reference to "that day" in Mark 4:35 locates the maritime turbulence as occurring after Jesus's extended discourse on fruitfulness (4:1–34), earlier on "that [same] day." But does that mean this seeds-and-soils discourse and the following storm-stilling are linked in subject matter? Conceivable, but highly unlikely, for there are no other textual clues to incline us in that direction.

On the other hand, there are several literary indicators linking 4:35–41 with *other* pericopes, but not with 4:1–34, corroborating a different understanding of what Mark is doing in this particular text¹³:

- 1) The unity of the larger section, Mark 4:35–5:43, is obvious from its component pericopes: salvation from *near death* by capsizing in a storm (4:35–41); a man *living among the dead* exorcised of his demons (5:1–20); a woman ill with a decade-long hemorrhage—*living dead*—restored (5:25–34); and a girl, *actually dead*, revived (5:21–24, 35–43). All of these demonstrations of Jesus' power are critical for the disciple to know, as he/she follows Jesus in discipleship, into sure suffering of the same kinds.¹⁴
- 2) Jesus' exclamation "Do you *still* not have faith?" (4:40) links this miracle story in the boat not with his non-miraculous didactic session in 4:1–34, but with all the wonders the disciples had seen Jesus perform thus far—the exorcisms and healings of Mark 1–3.
- 3) The stilling of the storm was impressive enough in itself, but Mark takes pains to equate it with an exorcism, the tempestuous sea and wind being anthropomorphized ("daimonomorphized"?). Indeed, Jesus rebukes the wind into "silence" as though it were an animate being that dared heckle the Master of ocean and earth and skies (4:39). And then another exorcism, an actual one, follows in the very next pericope (5:1–20)!
- 4) With Jesus' rebuke, the "great storm" of 4:37 becomes a "great calm" in 4:39 (to which, all the disciples can muster is "great fear," 4:41), clearly emphasizing the incredible power of Jesus over nature. There is no call to turn it into an allegory of the kingdom. In fact, even Mark's labeling that body of water as "sea" is striking, the first such instance in contemporary literature (everyone else called it a "lake," including Luke in 5:1, 2; 8:22, 23, 33). With this term, Mark was evoking the ancient near eastern myth of the divine warrior powerful enough to conquer the forces of chaos represented by the "sea," *yam*, a feat that Yahweh himself easily duplicates.¹⁵ Thus, this boat-and-storm miracle was essentially a mighty act of God, an encouraging lesson for all disciples following the only One who is powerful, even over nature; it is not necessarily a comment on the continuance of the kingdom.
- 5) Indeed, this pericope may be an ironic *counter* to the passage it just followed. Here the elements "obey" (*hypakouō*) Jesus (Mark 4:41): inanimate nature listens/obeys. But what about the disciples who had just been commanded to "listen" (*akouō*, 4:3, 9, 20) in the previous pericope? Unfortunately, they don't: they "still" lack faith (4:40).
- 6) Besides, the question of these faithless disciples, "Who then is this ...?" (4:41), is stunningly answered in the next scene, when the demoniac, in his very first words, addresses Jesus as "Son of God Most High" (5:7; the disciples had acknowledged him earlier only as "Teacher," 4:38). Demons know Jesus; the disciples do not!

¹³ See Abraham Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 92–104.

¹⁴ Mark's Gospel, after all, is a handbook of discipleship.

¹⁵ Gen 1:1–10; 8:1; Job 38:8–11; Ps 65:5–8; 74:12–17; 77:16–20; 89:9–14; etc.

- 7) The cured demoniac, a Gentile, is positively contrasted with the disciples, Jews. After his miracle by the tombs, he proclaims (5:19–20); the disciples do no such thing after their miracle in the boat. Instead, they, like the onlookers in 5:15, only fear (4:40–41).

All that to say, Robinson’s attempt to relate the stilling of the storm to the persistence of the divine kingdom pays inadequate attention to valid textual clues that alone help one discern authorial *doing*/pragmatics. In any case, three decades and three editions of Robinson’s *Biblical Preaching* indicate no acquaintance with such a hermeneutic. Sunukjian affirms that that the Big Idea approach hones in on “the essential core [Big Idea/take-home truth] of what the author is *saying*.”¹⁶ That’s exactly the problem: with the Big Idea’s laser-like focus on authorial sayings, there is invariably a neglect of authorial *doings* in Scripture. Unfortunately, this is representative of most Bible interpreters. They weren’t taught about authorial *doings* in seminary, they don’t hear this in conferences, they don’t find this in podcasts, they don’t read this in commentaries, they don’t see this modeled in pulpits. How, then, can one expect them to acknowledge pragmatics (or whatever else it may be called)?¹⁷

2 Samuel 11–12 and Inutility of Story(re)telling

In my paper, I had critiqued the Mathewson-Borden Big Idea reduction of 2 Samuel 11–12 as inadequate, one that, again, does not take into consideration a number of textual clues to authorial *doings* in that pericope. Mathewson protests: “Whether or not an exegetical analysis of 2 Samuel 11–12 needs to reflect the chiasmic structure Kuruvilla proposes is open to debate.”¹⁸ And I’d join that debate—energetically, of course! To figure out what authors *do* with what they say, one’s exegetical analyses must be as comprehensive as one can make them, undertaken to the best of one’s abilities, in order to appreciate the fullness of the thrust/force/pericopal theology of the text.¹⁹ If the chiasm of 2 Samuel 11–12 had been considered, Mathewson-Borden’s reduction would have pointed to David’s misdemeanors as the cause of the divine rebuke (it is at the center of the chiasmic structure: 2 Samuel 11:27b²⁰)—the king’s deeds that were utterly reprehensible in the sight of God. And if the “send” motif had been seen as a pointer to authorial *doing*, David’s reined exercise of power would have been evident in any reduction. And so on with the rest of the textual clues in the pericope. Unfortunately, I saw no obvious sign of any recognition of authorial *doings* in the Mathewson-Borden Big Idea: “David learns/believers must learn to accept what the grace of God gives him/them and what the grace of God does not.”²¹ No question, there is a vast difference between the reduction of Mathewson-

¹⁶ Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 66 (italics added).

¹⁷ For my critique of standard interpretive operations as they are currently taught in seminary classes and dogmatized in Bible commentaries, see Abraham Kuruvilla, “What is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*? Pragmatics and Preaching—An Appeal,” *JETS* 60 (2017): 557–80. This article, a response to it from one of my New Testament colleagues, Buist Fanning, and my rejoinder to Fanning are all available on my website: <http://homiletix.com/kuruvillajets2017/>. Feel free to add your voice to the ongoing discussion in the comments section.

¹⁸ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 36.

¹⁹ My commentaries attempt to aid the preacher in this, as I go pericope by pericope through a biblical book, discovering for readers clues that help them discern pericopal theology. (By the way, free single-chapter samples from each of the commentaries I’ve written are available for download at www.homiletix.com.)

²⁰ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 830.

²¹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 830.

Borden and mine, in both process (attention to authorial saying vs. authorial *doing*) and product (resulting Big Idea vs. Theological Focus).²²

But Mathewson counters: “The actual sermon Paul Borden preached on this text shows that these criticisms are unfounded.”²³ So, I took up the challenge and examined Borden’s sermon manuscript for 2 Samuel 11–12.²⁴ Of its 394 lines, almost a third (123 lines), are illustrations, including the introduction. Another 115 lines simply retell the story (more on story[re]telling, below). Direct Scripture quotations take 27 lines, but these are employed just to fill out the story(re)telling. And 19 lines paraphrase other verses. However, every Scripture quote in the sermon is from 2 Samuel 12; not a single verse from 2 Samuel 11 shows up, either verbatim or reworded. Another 12 lines speculate on David’s response to God’s indictment—he was contrite. Most of the remaining 100 lines explicate Borden’s Big Idea of 2 Samuel 11–12, which, according to Mathewson, is: “Believers must learn to accept what the grace of God has given them and what the grace of God has not.”²⁵ In sum, not much authorial *doing* is curated in Borden’s sermon.²⁶

In his afterword, Mathewson provides an outline to Borden’s sermon:

Introduction

- I. God punishes David severely for committing a sin greater than murder and adultery (11:1–12:12).
- II. God forgives David because he faces his sin head-on (12:13).
- III. (*Big idea*) David learns to accept what the grace of God gives him and what the grace of God does not (12:14–25).²⁷

So, does the story come from 11:1–12:13 (I. and II.) and the Big Idea from 12:14–25 (III.) as it appears in the outline? In any case, only twelve verses from 2 Samuel 12 were directly referred to in Borden’s sermon; every other part of the inspired text was only indirectly touched upon, and that in retelling the story, paraphrasing authorial saying. All of this once again substantiates my claim: Big Idea proponents rarely touch on authorial *doing*, which can only be discovered by theological exegesis that considers not just the *what* of the story, but also *how* the story is told—all the “filigrees of structure and nuances of language that contribute to the

²² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 844–45. More below, on how much authorial *doing* needs to be evident in a reduction.

²³ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 36.

²⁴ In Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 189–203.

²⁵ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 199 (italics removed). This is far too general to be of any homiletical use. Such discontent with divine grace (“a sin greater than murder and adultery,” according to Mathewson-Borden; see the sermon outline), after all, is the root of *all* sin and David had already perpetrated a few of these even before this narrative. So a reduction needs to be more specific for the particular pericope under consideration, taking into account authorial *doings* therein: “Irreverence for God and indifference to his word is manifested in the unreined exercise of power, the unrestricted of self-indulgent passions, and the unrecognition of evil as reprehensible in the sight of God; this disrespect for the authority and rulership of the true sovereign brings discipline” (the negative statement of my positive Theological Focus for 2 Sam 11–12 [Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 844]). For how this Theological Focus was drafted from textual clues via pericopal theology, see my “Pericopal Theology: An Intermediary between Text and Application,” *TrinJ* 31 NS (2010): 265–283 (available at <http://homiletix.com/abes-articles/>).

²⁶ As Mathewson noted (“Let the Big Idea Live!” 36), Borden does bring out the contrast between the faithful Hittite soldier, Uriah, and the unfaithful Jewish king, David. Appropriate, but inadequate by itself, orphaned as this clue is in his sermon.

²⁷ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 199.

experience of the text.”²⁸ Without adequate attention to those intricate textual clues that point to pericopal theology—all of them inspired by the divine Author—it is impossible for preachers (or their listeners) to experience the thrust of the text, the *doing* of the author. And as a result, it is highly unlikely that valid application can be arrived at.²⁹

None of this is very surprising, seeing how it was the “dean” of the Big Idea approach who blazed this rocky trail for his vast following. In a class on sermon forms taught by Robinson, a student asked: “In all of these—maybe I’ve missed something here—in all of these different forms, where does the Scripture, the actual use of Scripture fit? Like, you start off, you read your passage, and [inaudible] principle [inaudible] do you read your passage bit by bit?” Robinson’s answer is illuminating:

Yeah, that’s a matter of technique. I often read the Bible following the introduction. In the introduction, I create a need, get their attention, create a need, and then [inaudible] into the subject. [If] you read the Bible first and *then* give the introduction, reading the Bible at that point can be like the National Anthem at the football game. People hear it, but they don’t pay any attention to it. ... So I often put the Scripture, read the whole passage *following* the introduction. Then as I go back and develop—I go back into the passage a bit at a time. But that’s a matter of technique. That’s just a—no, it’s not integral to what you’re doing. What is integral to what you’re doing is the technique of getting people’s noses in the text [by doing the introduction before reading Scripture]. And that’s a—that really takes a certain kind of technique, it’s an important technique. Right, the seventh stage [And Robinson moves on to the next item in his pedagogical agenda.]³⁰

Unfortunately, reading the text within the sermon, in its development, “a bit at a time,” is only a technical issue for Robinson, “not integral to what you’re doing.” In my extended perusal of his work and considerable scrutiny of his recordings, I have yet to find Robinson addressing this issue. That is telling! On the other hand, in my own conception of preaching, this is *the* primary role of the preacher and the most important part of a sermon—the curation of the text: discovering textual clues for listeners, thereby facilitating their discernment of pericopal theology.³¹ The text *must* be pointed to and read and glossed so that the audience discovers these

²⁸ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 835.

²⁹ Haddon Robinson wrote the foreword to Mathewson’s *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*. One of his statements therein about Old Testament narratives struck me: “Because we thought of them as simple little stories, we missed how thick they were with meaning” (“Foreword,” 12). He is right, but unfortunately, Big Idea proponents, including Robinson himself, seem to pay only lip-service to “thickness” of textual meaning, a notion introduced by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (*Collected Essays* [vol. 2 of *Collected Papers*; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971], 480–96). Kevin J. Vanhoozer effectively adopted this metaphor for textual interpretation: “A description is sufficiently thick when it allows us to appreciate everything the author is *doing* in a text” (*Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 284 [italics altered]). On the other hand, if the *doing* of an author is not accounted for, that interpretation of the text is woefully “thin.” One might also want to examine one of Mathewson’s own sermons, on Gen 22:1–19, and judge for yourself whether his interpretation is “thick” or “thin” (*The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 161–75). You might compare my “The *Aqedah* (Genesis 22): What is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*?” *JETS* 55 (2012): 489–508. Also check out another of Mathewson’s Big Ideas, this one on 1 Samuel 17 (*The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 89). And for a contrasting perspective, see my “David v. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*?” *JETS* 58 (2015): 487–506. Both these *JETS* articles, and others I’ve written, are available on my website: <http://homiletix.com/abes-articles/>.

³⁰ “Outlines Etc 770000,” 53:30–56:12 (emphases added for clarity).

³¹ A secondary role for the preacher and the sermon is to provide relevance, how the pericopal theology impacts listeners—this includes application. See my *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral*

clues for itself, facilitating its experience of the text+thrust—this is what it means to curate the text. Why else should the preacher be interposed between the word of God written for the people of God? Certainly not to retell the story creatively! But here’s Robinson again, on another occasion:

When I do narrative preaching, ... I will spend time telling the story. In a forty-minute message, I might take fifteen minutes to tell that story. I try to tell it in a relevant sort of a way. Coming out of that story, I will say, “There is one great principle that emerges from that story.” And I will state that principle. And then I will try to apply that principle to life.³²

So, what about the retelling of biblical narratives in sermons? There are some fundamental problems with this common homiletical tactic:

- 1) If the purpose of story(re)telling is to bring people up to speed (to further biblical literacy and historical knowledge) and to provide necessary background for the current pericope, such retelling is appropriate, but that shouldn’t take more than a couple of minutes to do, at most!³³ Borden took 29 percent of his sermonic lines (and of his sermonic time, too, I presume) to retell the story; Robinson confesses to utilizing 37.5 percent of his—far too much precious time consumed by what ultimately does not further the audience’s experience of text+thrust.
- 2) Mathewson-Borden would argue that it is the retelling of the story that draws out the Big Idea. I would rebut that it is not the preacher’s retelling of the textual events (authorial saying) that facilitates the thrust/force of the text being caught by listeners, but the sermonic curation of the how the story is told (authorial *doing*): the very words used in the text, the contrasts drawn, the structure employed, etc.—textual clues to pericopal theology.
- 3) When the Big Idea preacher retells the story to reveal the Big Idea ostensibly concealed in it, it assumes that the inspired words of the text are secondary in importance. Because if any kind of retelling—creative reading, artistic reenacting, or even a pictorial redrawing—of the text and its story were sufficient to expose the Big Idea lurking therein, then what would be the need for plenary, verbal inspiration?³⁴ I affirm that changing any word in the account alters the text’s thrust in some way, to some extent; therefore plenary, verbal inspiration was necessary, to maintain the inspired nature of the thrust, the pericopal theology.³⁵

Ministry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), and *A Manual for Preaching: The Journey from Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019, forthcoming).

³² “Structures Etc 770000,” 1:04:40–1:05:15.

³³ If I’m preaching a narrative, after a brief retelling of the story (authorial saying), I invite my audience to zoom in on the critical details—*how* the story is told—in order to discern pericopal theology, to catch the author’s agenda, his *doing*, how he wants his text to be experienced, how he intends it hit us. This is text curation, just as a museum docent does for, say, Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. By no stretch of imagination are curators recreating *Mona Lisa* as their own masterpieces (= the sermon, retelling the story). Rather, they are curating the divine Master’s piece (= the text, facilitating listeners’ experience of the text+theology), as handmaids to the sublime and inspired opus of Scripture. These textual curators are enabling the word of God to be apprehended by the people of God for its thrust.

³⁴ I called this “a leak in the orthodox doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration” (Kuruville, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 834).

³⁵ You can tell I come to the issue of inspiration of Scripture from a different direction. It is *because* the thrust/pericopal theology was to be inspired, that the text itself had to be inspired—every word and every phrase, every jot and every tittle.

- 4) Story(re)tellers are often oblivious to the fact that the events behind the text, i.e., what happened, are not inspired; it is only the Holy Spirit's *account of what happened* that is inspired and profitable. And that inspired account alone, with all its fine details and masterful clues, will lead one to discern the *doing* of the author, to experience the thrust of the text, to be impacted by pericopal theology, and thus to be trained in righteousness and moved towards Christlikeness.³⁶ Therefore, it is the *text* that must be privileged!

Judges 17–18 and Insubstantiality of Reductions

Mathewson cites my own Theological Focus of Judges 17–18 as an example of a generic reduction: “Godless leadership leads to godlessness in society that invites the discipline of God.”³⁷ I heartily agree with Mathewson that reductions, by definition, are abstractions tending towards non-specificity. However, I would equally heartily disagree with Mathewson's assertion that my Theological Focus for Judges 17–18 “is so general that it fits just about every narrative in the book of Judges!”³⁸

As I have shown in my commentary, it is only in the epilogue of the book (Judges 17–21) that all the godless leadership on display in prior chapters produces its putrefying fruit. Here is where the sins of leaders in pericopes past come home to roost in the sins of society (indeed, in Judges 17–21 there are *no leaders* visible). And so it is from Judges 17–18 that this particular Theological Focus can be abstracted: “Godless leadership [of Judges 1–16] leads to godlessness in society [of Judges 17–18, and it is not confined to idolatry, à la Mathewson] that invites the discipline of God [just deserts].” No other pericope in Judges can be reduced to this particular Theological Focus; thus far, all of them, without exception, have dealt with some aspect or another of godless *leadership*.³⁹ And in the pericopes following Judges 17–18, this corporate ungodliness continues to be elucidated as an utterly immoral lack of concern for, and horrific abuse of, the weak and defenseless (Judges 19), and the resulting havoc of a civil war—with its own atrocious abuses of the disenfranchised—in that same godless and leaderless society (Judges 20–21).

On the other hand, Mathewson's Big Idea for Judges 17–18 reads: “When we turn from God to idols we miss the presence of God and experience emptiness or bondage.”⁴⁰ But *contra* Mathewson, there is more than just one manifestation of ungodliness in this pericope: as I have shown in my commentary, the Decalogue is blatantly violated in this pericope (and in the ones that follow); besides idolatry, there is also rampant theft, dishonoring of parents, and taking Yahweh's name in vain. Neither will it do, as Mathewson attempts, to cursorily transmute the Assyrian Captivity of the Northern Kingdom in 734 BCE (Judges 18:31) into some kind of existential “emptiness” or “bondage.” It is actually a divine disciplinary action in the form of tit for tat that malefactors suffer. Thus: “Godless leadership leads to godlessness in society that invites the discipline of God.”

³⁶ For a recent summary of this aspect of my hermeneutic and its ramifications, see my “Christiconic View,” in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today* (eds. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 43–70, as well as my responses to the other contributors to this volume.

³⁷ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 34–35; citing my *Judges: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 264.

³⁸ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 35.

³⁹ For the Theological Foci of each pericope in the book, please see Kuruvilla, *Judges*.

⁴⁰ “Let the Big Idea Live!” 35.

As I affirmed in connection with 2 Samuel 11–12 above, reductions *should* show signs of authorial *doing* in their single-sentence distillations. But all Mathewson has done is paraphrase the authorial *saying* of Judges 17–18—idolatry, captivity, loss, and sanctuary—into a simplistic Big Idea. Instead, the interpreter needs to ask: What is the author *doing* with all that he is saying about idolatry, captivity, loss, sanctuary (as well as other textual clues)? And how does all the *doing* here cohere with what the author has been *doing* in previous pericopes and link with what he is *doing* in the following ones? If you envisage Judges as a necklace (= the book + its overall thrust) made up of a series of pearls (= pericopes + their unique thrusts), with each gem on this piece of jewelry meticulously graded and selected and all put together deliberately to *do* something, you can see how Mathewson’s Big Idea of Judges 17–18 is out of place on the necklace of pearls. Why should a generic warning about idolatry and the resulting angst of “emptiness” and “bondage” show up here in a book dealing with facets of godless leadership (Judges 1–16) and the calamitous consequences thereof for the community of God (Judges 17–21)? This is another common affliction of text distillers who focus only on authorial saying: their fabricated and insubstantial distillations of pericopes do not have a whole lot to do with the trajectory and thrust of the book as a whole. One hardly gets a sense in such interpretations of any interpericopal consistency, i.e., the coherence of authorial *doings* (pericopal theology) across pericopes.

Mathewson then declares that “any Big Idea or Theological Focus statement looks more like a saying (semantics) than a doing (pragmatics).”⁴¹ No doubt, a reduction of any kind is, by definition, incomplete and fractional, but I take issue with Mathewson’s assertion that the Theological Focus resembles semantics more than it does pragmatics. I argue and teach that the Theological Focus *should* refract the underlying theological exegesis of the text and the pericopal theology so discerned.⁴² Despite Mathewson’s claim that “it is not easy to assess how well or how poorly a distillation reflects solid exegesis,” I can tell from a glance at a student’s expressed Theological Focus whether he/she has apprehended the inexpressible pericopal theology or not.⁴³ But if Mathewson is right that the Big Idea does *not* have to reflect or give some evidence of the theological thrust/pragmatics of a text, what, then, is the use of the Big Idea in homiletics?

Big Ideas and “Pegs”?

Here is Mathewson’s answer to my question about the utility of the Big Idea: “The genius of big idea preaching is to identify the ‘peg’ on which all other ideas hang. ... good exegetes and preachers look for the unifying idea that holds the other ideas together.” And, later: “It is simply an attempt to provide listeners with a peg on which they can hang the details—including the exegetical details of a text.” And yet again: “We help our listeners when we can offer a Big Idea

⁴¹ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 37.

⁴² I use the metaphor of refraction deliberately. Reflection implies that authorial saying and elements of the text show up as such in the Theological Focus. They should not. Rather, it is the authorial *doing*, pericopal theology, that is reduced to the Theological Focus. So here’s the assembly line: Discover textual clues (by theological exegesis) → Discern pericopal theology → Draft a Theological Focus. I see this process as a *refraction* of the text, via pericopal theology, into the Theological Focus (rather than a reflection), with textual clues leaving discernible traces in the refracted distillate.

⁴³ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 36. Even granting Mathewson’s claim that assessment of a reduced Big Idea for authorial *doing* is not easy, shouldn’t 14 pages of accompanying expatiation on 2 Sam 11–12 (9½ pages of sermon + 4½ pages of commentary—Mathewson’s foreword, afterword, and interview of Borden; *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 189–203) have evidenced some recognition of authorial *doing*? But, alas, ...!

statement that provides a peg on which they can hang all of the other ideas and exegetical details that they encounter as they listen to a sermon.⁴⁴ I am lost: Why do exegetical details need a “peg”? They certainly didn’t need one in the text, so why construct one now for the sermon? From what I’ve seen, when preachers use their Big Idea “peg” to “hang” exegetical details in a sermon, all they are doing is proving to their listeners with these hanging details that the Big Idea peg they came up with is actually in the text (which, of course, it is not⁴⁵).

Thus, the fundamental question is this: If the text is like a picture or a poem or a piece of music or even a person (in the non-discursive aspect of the writing⁴⁶), is it even possible to reduce it into a Big Idea propositional statement that fully captures the thrust of the text and which needs to be conveyed to sermon listeners as the all-important take-home truth?⁴⁷ I think not. Instead, I affirm that the text *qua* text is all we have, and the text has a force/thrust that the author intends for us to experience. It is the text alone that is inspired and that must be privileged and preached—not a distillate, not a reduction, not a Big Idea, not a Theological Focus, not anything else but the text.

Please note: My gripe is not with occasional summaries of some sort within sermons, a necessary requirement of all oral-aural (mouth-to-ear) communication.⁴⁸ My grievance is with the assumption that one can adequately boil down the pericope into some Big Idea (distilling the text⁴⁹) and that that Big Idea is what the audience should catch, without which it ends up with nothing (preaching the distillate). Robinson represents all who hold this view: “If we are ever to preach effectively, we must first of all get our sermons as [big] ideas. If you do not get them as [big] ideas, you do not get them at all.”⁵⁰ And: “I really don’t understand the Book of Romans unless I understand its subject and complement [= Big Idea proposition]. By the way, you don’t understand the Bible, unless you do that.”⁵¹ Again: “Until you can answer ‘What is the writer talking about?’ ‘What is he saying about what he is talking about?’ [the answers to which yield the Big Idea proposition] you cannot go on. ... Until you get that, you cannot preach.”⁵² That is some indictment of preachers who dare to proceed without a Big Idea proposition!

Apparently, without the Big Idea being distilled from the text the preacher gets nothing out of Scripture; and without the Big Idea distillate being preached from the pulpit, listeners get nothing out of the sermon, either. So, Sunukjian:

⁴⁴ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 34, 36, 38.

⁴⁵ For that matter, neither is my own reduced construct, the Theological Focus, in the text. But then, I don’t use my reduction in homiletics as Big Idea patrons do theirs, as “take-home truths” and “essential cores.” See Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 844–46, for the narrow and constrained functions of the Theological Focus in my conception.

⁴⁶ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 840–843.

⁴⁷ These are the two problems I inveighed against in my original essay: distilling the text and preaching the distillate.

⁴⁸ See Kuruvilla, *A Manual for Preaching*, where I advocate such periodic *précis*.

⁴⁹ As Haddon Robinson declared, “A sermon, like any good speech, embodies a *single, all-encompassing concept*” (*Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014], 17; italics added).

⁵⁰ “Subject + Complement 770000,” 05:20–05:35.

⁵¹ “Subject + Complement 770000,” 1:13:00–1:13:05.

⁵² “Unity Order Progress 770000,” 28:15–29:10.

It is your goal as a speaker to have one single sentence which somehow captures everything you are trying to get across. And you will notice . . . that out of this biblical passage it seems that the author wanted to get across *this* concept, and out of this passage, here's his main idea. . . . When all is said and done, you can put the whole paragraph, or the whole chapter, or the whole book, or the whole three paragraphs—you can put it all together, and you can find one sentence, which will get it across. And that's what we will call the main idea. . . . Some people call it the proposition; others call it the thesis statement, the central idea, the big idea. . . . That is *the* sentence that captures the whole sermon.⁵³

Again, I ask: In such a scheme, why do we need the text in the first place, except to discover the Big Idea supposedly hidden in it (and then to validate this discovery for listeners)? I argue, rather, that what preachers and listeners need to catch from the text is its thrust/force, pericopal theology (that moves us to apply). And that thrust/force *cannot* be “embodied” or “captured” without residue by any kind of propositional reduction constructed by the preacher. Every word of the inspired text is necessary for the pericopal theology to be conveyed with its full force. No humanly created verbiage or manmade Big Idea “pegs” can substitute for it. Therefore, preachers and listeners need the text, *all* the text, and *especially* the text, to experience pericopal theology. To think that pericopes of Scripture can be distilled into Big Ideas without loss, and that those Big Ideas are what need to be conveyed sermonically to an audience is, in my opinion, a misconception of both hermeneutics and homiletics.

In contrast to the operations of Big Idea defenders, I do not see the single-sentence reduction that I concoct for sermon preparation purposes (Theological Focus) as being essential for the audience's experience of the text+theology; it does not even have to show up in a sermon. After all, the Theological Focus reduction is drafted by the preacher (and for the preacher) only *after* the inexpressible pericopal theology (thrust/force) has been grasped, not before. So, as I see it, preachers should facilitate the audience's seeing the exegetical clues so that they experience the irreducible text+theology, just as the preachers themselves discovered the exegetical clues in their study and discerned the text+theology, *sans* Big Idea.⁵⁴

But what does Mathewson do in the sermon with the Big Idea “peg” that he has chiseled out of the text? “As a Bible expositor, you will now take the exegetical idea of your passage and submit it to three developmental or functional questions”—explanation, validation, application.⁵⁵ He is following Robinson: “As you look at your idea and its development, you're trying to find out what has to be explained, what has to be proved, what has to be applied.”⁵⁶ Likewise, Sunukjian: “The Developmental Questions. There are three questions. These questions will show you what you need to do with any point or assertion or statement or outline or idea in the message.”⁵⁷ In sum, according to these “better practitioners,” the distilled Big Idea is what must be preached, and the sermon is simply an explanation of that Big Idea, validation

⁵³ “Common Ground–1,” 10:00–10:50 (italics reflect the oral emphases in the recording).

⁵⁴ That makes the primary role of the sermon almost akin to that of footnotes to an article. Footnotes are not recreating or rewriting the article, but only providing necessary glosses to it, so that readers may “experience” the article as its writer intended. Likewise, the sermon, primarily, is only a curation of the pericope, and the preacher only a midwife to the text, facilitating listeners' “thick reading” thereof, so that they experience its thrust fully and maximally, as its A/author intended. Secondly, of course, the sermon should address the relevance of the pericopal theology to the particular audience (this aspect of homiletics is not dealt with either in my original article or in this rejoinder).

⁵⁵ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 95.

⁵⁶ Robinson, “DQs Principle Purpose Application 770000,” 03:20–03:39.

⁵⁷ Sunukjian, “Common Ground–2,” 21:28–21:43.

of that Big Idea, and application of that Big Idea. Sunukjian confirmed that the Big Idea was “what you want them [listeners] to remember. If they forget everything else, but if they remember this, you’re happy. What’s that sentence? That’s what I’ll call the main idea. Of all of the things you’re gonna say, it stands *supreme*.”⁵⁸ Yes, the Big Idea is *El Supremo*, the emperor!⁵⁹

So Mathewson continues to insist that “there is nothing inherent in the theory of Big Idea preaching which precludes an emphasis on the text’s theology or the diverse literary forms through which Scripture communicates.”⁶⁰ Oh, yes, there is! Big Idea pleaders think that the Big Idea is what the writer of Scripture first entertained in his mind. Then, apparently, that author looked through a collection of illustrations, and picked an appropriate story in which to couch his Big Idea (like a shell to shroud a nut, or a wrapper to enfold a candy). After all, as Robinson said, “When you look at . . . Romans or Ephesians or Galatians, you sense an argument in those books. And by an argument, you mean, the author has a concept, he has an idea, a principle he’s trying to get across.”⁶¹

In turn, the preacher is supposed to get rid of the “body” (shell/candy wrapper = the author’s text), isolate the Big Idea (nut/candy = the preacher’s distillate), and re-couch it in a sermon (a fresh shell/candy wrapper) in a creative and catchy style, retellings and enactments and all. Robinson again: “What you find in a sermon, you find in the Scriptures”—i.e., author’s Big Idea seemingly wrapped in text becomes preacher’s Big Idea wrapped in sermon.⁶² The text itself is relegated to secondary importance, only being marshalled to lend proof that the preacher’s sermonic Big Idea is indeed the author’s textual Big Idea, too. Thus, the text’s *doing* is summarily neglected.⁶³

So, without a doubt, Mathewson’s declarations notwithstanding, Big Idea-ism is inherently antithetical to pericopal theology-ism. In fact, Mathewson’s chapter on how to develop a sermon is titled “Packaging the Big Idea.”⁶⁴ The Big Idea (nut/candy) discovered by reverse engineering the text (stripping off the shell/candy wrapper), is now (re)packaged in a sermon. Then I suppose what Big Idea proponents expect the audience to do is get rid of the sermonic shell/candy wrapper—i.e., reverse engineer the *sermon*—to isolate the Big Idea nut/candy, which according to these “better practitioners” is the “take home truth.” One wonders: 1) What’s the need for the text? Why not get rid of the text and keep the Big Idea (seemingly “packaged” in an unnecessary text)? By that same token: 2) What’s the need for the sermon? Why not get rid of the sermon, too, and just directly deliver the Big Idea to listeners (without “packaging” it in an unnecessary sermon)? I submit that such convoluted approaches are a

⁵⁸ “Common Ground–1,” 07:19–08:17 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁹ But . . . where are the emperor’s clothes?

⁶⁰ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 34.

⁶¹ “Definition, Etc. 760113,” 24:26–24:41.

⁶² “Unity Order Progress 770000,” 16:20–16:34. If this is the case, as I’ve asked before: Was not God wasting our time with those voluminous tomes in Scripture (shells and wrappers), making things unnecessarily difficult for all its readers? Could he not just have handed us those Big Ideas (nuts and candies)? Incidentally, when I used another version of this rhetorical question in my article, Mathewson labeled it “sarcasm” (“Let the Big Idea Live!” 33). On the other hand, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., whom I had taken to task in that same article for being the architect of “principlization,” a variation of Big Idea-ology (“Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 828), found the tone of my entire essay “irenic” (see his comment, as well as that of Timothy C. Tennent, at <http://homiletix.com/kill-the-big-idea/>).

⁶³ To be sure, one cannot pin too much blame on Big Idea practitioners for this omission. Where are the Bible scholars, seminary professors, and commentary writers who ought to be at the vanguard of proclaiming texts’ *doings*?

⁶⁴ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 104.

disservice to God, a disservice to his word, a disservice to his people, and a disservice to his world.⁶⁵ But I, too, have preached such sermons, and I hereby repent, in sackcloth and ashes!

In short, when Mathewson asserts: “I am convinced that [the] Big Idea approach can help ‘listeners experience the text and its theology—the agenda of the A/author—in all its fullness’ just as well as the Pericopal Theology Approach,” I have serious doubts.⁶⁶ To reiterate: I believe Big Idea practitioners have not understood what pericopal theology is and how it functions in homiletics and, indeed, in spiritual formation and discipleship.⁶⁷ They assume that without the Big Idea, preachers and listeners are lost, not found, and are blind, not seeing. I, on the other hand, assert that the thrust of the text, pericopal theology, is sufficient, by God’s grace, to lead us all safely home, minus dangers, toils, snares, and distillations.

Big Ideas and Bach?

In his closing argument, Mathewson resorts to a musical analogy, drawing from a biography of Bach by James R. Gaines⁶⁸: “Bach’s Musical Offering [according to Gaines, writes Mathewson] issued a scathing attack on the lifestyle and values of the young king,” Frederick the Great (1712–1786), in the form of a musical piece that, apparently, in its structure and its inscriptions, made subtle jabs at the king, slyly warning him of coming judgment for forsaking divine law.⁶⁹ Gaines, a former chief editor of *People* magazine, is quite creative in his thesis, but is this really plausible? We are talking about *Frederick*—an eighteenth-century despot, a religious skeptic, potentate of Prussia for over 46 years, one who was well known for his military victories and praised by Napoleon Bonaparte, and later even glorified by the Nazis as a precursor of Hitler. Thomas Mann described this ruler and his habits as “cynical, arid, inhuman, and hostile to life.”⁷⁰ Another scholar added that Frederick “was feared, indeed hated, throughout Europe.”⁷¹ This was not a person into whose unsuspecting guts one would have been inclined to slide a stiletto, Ehud-like.

That *Bach* would issue a “scathing attack” on such a suzerain of his boggles the mind. Bach, a saboteur? He who was obsequious to a fault when it came to his patrons? He, who always wanted more money from his employers and even hoped to gain some financial consideration from Frederick the Great with this piece he had just composed and submitted to him? He, whose son, Carl Philipp Emmanuel, was, at that time, in the employ of this very sovereign? He, an old musician only three years away from death, would pick a fight with this powerful regent? And this when Bach was, with this masterpiece, making amends for his failure to compose on the

⁶⁵ For his part, Robinson declared that if preachers are not clear in their sermons—by failing to elucidate and express the Big Idea of the text and sermon—“that’s not just a matter of homiletics, that’s a *moral* matter” (and he said this thrice; “Subject + Complement 770000, 29:43–31:44; italics reflect the oral emphasis!).

⁶⁶ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 37, citing Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 842.

⁶⁷ For that matter, I also worry about their understanding of what language is and how it functions, and what Scripture is and how it functions.

⁶⁸ *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Harper, 2005).

⁶⁹ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 39.

⁷⁰ Thomas Mann, *Friedrich und die grosse Koalition* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1915), 52 (my translation).

⁷¹ Otto L. Bettmann, “Bach at Potsdam,” *The American Scholar* 52.1 (1983): 82.

spot (at Frederick's palace a couple of months earlier) a six-part fugue on a musical theme given to him by that king?⁷²

And to think that *this*, “one of the greatest works of fugal wizardry of all time,”⁷³ *Das Musikalische Opfer* (“The Musical Offering,” BWV 1079)—to think that *this* masterpiece was nothing but an act of revenge for some perceived wrong is, while conceivable, entirely unlikely. In fact, one of the components of Bach's multipart opus was a magnificent trio sonata that sings the fugal material offered to him by the king, and which was set for the king himself to play on his own instrument of expertise, the flute. “[Bach] considered his benefactor's taste not only in the choice of instruments but also in the manner of style,” even though the king was more than a quarter century younger than the maestro. “Bach accommodates himself in the fast movements [of the trio sonata] to the style of the younger generation—to which his own sons and Frederick the Great, too, belong. ... Thus the Sonata in the ‘Musical Offering’ is in a threefold sense dedicated to the author of the theme: in its thematic material, its instrumental setting, and the style at which it aims.”⁷⁴ In fact, this is true in a *fourfold* sense, because the entire work was also explicitly dedicated by Bach to Frederick:

Most gracious King!

In deepest humility I dedicate herewith to Your Majesty a musical offering, the noblest part of which derives from Your Majesty's Own August Hand. With awesome pleasure I still remember your very special Royal Grace when, some time ago, during my visit to Potsdam, your Majesty's Self deigned to play to me a theme for a fugue upon the clavier, and at the same time charged me most graciously to carry it out [i.e., develop into a fugue] in Your Majesty's Most August Presence. To obey Your Majesty's command was my most humble duty. I noticed very soon, however, that for lack of necessary preparation, the execution of the task did not fare as well as such an excellent theme demanded. I resolved therefore and promptly pledged myself to work out this right Royal theme more fully and then make it known to the world. This resolve has now been carried out as well as possible, and it has none other than this irreproachable intent, to glorify, if only in a small point, the fame of a Monarch whose greatness and power, as in all the sciences of war and peace, so especially in music, everyone must admire and revere. I make bold to add this most humble request: may Your Majesty deign to dignify the present modest labor with a gracious acceptance and continue to grant Your Majesty's Most August Royal Grace to Your Majesty's most humble and obedient servant,

THE AUTHOR

Leipzig, July 7, 1747⁷⁵

All of this is mere satire and irony as Bach stabs the king in the back? Again, conceivable, but entirely unlikely. Here is the opinion of a preeminent Bach scholar:

We may assume that the phrases of this dedication are entirely sincere. Bach's praise of the King's theme is not flattery but a purely artistic acknowledgement. ... And that his visit to Potsdam belonged pleasantest of his recollections, is scarcely to be doubted. The hours

⁷² Bach's composition was delivered to Frederick the Great two *months* after the composer's meeting with the latter, not “two weeks later,” as Mathewson observed (“Let the Big Idea Live!” 39).

⁷³ Bettman, “Bach at Potsdam,” 81.

⁷⁴ Hans T. David, “Bach's ‘Musical Offering,’” *The Musical Quarterly* 23.3 (1937): 320, 322.

⁷⁵ *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (eds. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel; New York: W. W. Norton, 1945), 179.

spent with Frederick the Great were significant of one of the productive experiences of Bach's life—the only one, indeed, about which we have reliable information.⁷⁶

And those inscriptions on a couple of the individual components of “The Musical Offering,” that Mathewson and Gaines refer to, give no indication whatsoever that there was anything ulterior about them. Yes, Canon 5 (“Canon a 2, per Tonos”), when it returns to its own starting point, rises a whole tone, such that after six iterations, it reaches an octave higher than where it began. Gaines thinks the inscription to this canon, “As the notes ascend, so may the glory of the king,” is sardonic, because (according to Mathewson) “the genius of the canon is that it does not seem to rise at all.”⁷⁷ Well, that's highly debatable. With each round, the music *did* rise, by a tone. And with six iterations, the music *did* reach a whole octave higher. To consider that reaching an octave above starting point is, seemingly, “not ... to rise at all” is rather naïve. So Gaines' is a contrived interpretation, concocted to suit his preconceived “Big Idea,” which Mathewson approvingly cites: “Beware the appearance of good fortune, Frederick, stand in awe of a fate more fearful than any this world has to give, seek the glory that is beyond the glory of this fallen world, and know that there is a law higher than any king's which is never changing and by which you and every one of us will be judged.”⁷⁸ This is pure and simple eisegesis on the part of Gaines, seconded, upvoted, and liked by Mathewson. There is no reference to fate, glory, fallenness, law, or judgment in the entire musical piece, as Mathewson-Gaines would like us to think.⁷⁹ Neither is there any circumstantial evidence that Bach was up to some kind of underhanded mischief with his poisonous pen. *Au contraire!*

But Mathewson is right about Big Idea operations as he notes: “Towards the end of his riveting account, Gaines does something that Big Idea preachers do. He artfully weaves into his narration a distillation—dare I say it, the Big Idea—of Bach's message.”⁸⁰ I'm afraid Mathewson has, in his conclusion, hit the nail right on the head. This is exactly what Big Idea enthusiasts do: they artificially, and usually without any basis in the *doing* of text or A/author, forge a Big Idea—their own—and eisegetically invoke support for this imagined abstraction, while “weaving into [their sermons this] distillation.”

Nevertheless, Mathewson “walked away from Gaines' book ... stirred by the entire narrative. ... When Gaines shared Bach's ‘Big Idea,’ it did not land like a dull thud. Instead, it crystallized all of the details into a unifying whole.”⁸¹ *Bach's Big Idea?* Hardly. It was Gaines's own, disrespecting the context of the composition (and its inscriptions) and disregarding the

⁷⁶ David, “Bach's ‘Musical Offering,’” 317.

⁷⁷ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 39.

⁷⁸ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 39.

⁷⁹ That the ten canons in the piece represent the Ten Commandments and refer to the Law, as Mathewson, agreeing with Gaines, alleges, is a figment of the latter's imagination (“Let the Big Idea Live!” 39). There is absolutely no indication of anything sacred in this wordless composition dedicated to a godless king. Indeed, “The Musical Offering,” is a collection of thirteen individual pieces, set in an *ABCBA'* symmetry: A: ricercar (= fugue; in three voices); B: five canons; C: trio sonata; B': five canons; A': ricercar (in six voices). The five canons in each discrete section (B and B'—not set as an unbroken sequence of ten), themselves come in for some intricate internal arrangement (see David, “Bach's Musical Offering,” 325). I suppose I could create my own allegory from all this: ten canons = the Ten Commandments; trio sonata = the Trinity; ricercar (in three voices) = the Old Testament (Law, Prophets, Writings); ricercar (in six voices) = the New Testament (Gospels, Acts, Pauline Letters, Hebrews, General Epistles, Revelation). Readers with more vigorous imaginations than mine or that of Mathewson-Gaines will, I'm sure, come up with creative Big Ideas with other speculative geometries!

⁸⁰ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 39.

⁸¹ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!” 39.

danger such sneaky swipes would have posed to Bach's (and his son's) wellbeing. This kind of interpretation does Bach a disservice, his music a disservice, his devotees a disservice, and the world of art a disservice.

Despite Mathewson's protestations, the *modus operandi* of Big Idea devotees—their persevering with such distilled concoctions from texts, their assertions that there can be no understanding without such Big Ideas, their insistence that these distillates be propounded in every sermon lest the sermon be effete and abortive, and their perennial pedagogy of the Big Idea in every place—serves to validate my conclusion that all of those who are faithful to Robinson's *Biblical Preaching* explicitly or implicitly treat the Big Idea as a stand-in for the text, the skeleton upon which the biblical author fleshed his text, and the mannequin around which the preacher now drapes a sermon.

Unhealthy! In fact, methinks the patient is terminal. Isn't it time to sprinkle dust on Big Idea-ism and pronounce, "*Requiescat in pace!*"?

