



LET THE BIG IDEA LIVE! A RESPONSE TO ABRAHAM KURUVILLA

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Abraham Kuruvilla has thrown down the gauntlet. He has proposed that it is time to kill the “Big Idea” approach to preaching. He claims that this approach, espoused by Haddon Robinson and other homileticians, lacks hermeneutical rigor and fails to demonstrate what the biblical authors *do* with what they say.¹

I hold Abraham Kuruvilla in high regard,² and I find myself in agreement with many details in his proposal. However, I find his overall argument unconvincing. To be sure, he raises some legitimate concerns that should influence the way Big Idea preachers study and preach the biblical text. Yet the Big Idea approach is simply not the culprit for some of the hermeneutical and homiletical missteps that he rightly criticizes.

My counter-proposal is to let the Big Idea live. Here are four responses to the concerns Kuruvilla has raised.

THE BIG IDEA APPROACH, WHEN PROPERLY PRACTICED, IS NOT REDUCTIONISTIC

Kuruvilla states that he is “not against reductions *per se* in homiletics.” In fact, he utilizes an “appropriately created reduction” in his sermon preparation, which he designates as “the Theological Focus.”³ Rather, he objects to reducing the biblical text to propositions that “end up having a self-contained existence independent of the text and denuded of all its specificity.”⁴ He claims: “[I]n the Big Idea world, such a distillate of the text can effectively depose the text from its rightful throne and stand alone.”⁵ Using sarcasm to make this point, he writes: “Perhaps deity would have served himself and his people better had he just stuck to a bulleted list of timeless Big Ideas rather than messy stories and arcane prophecies and sentimental poetry.”⁶

However, Kuruvilla's criticisms do not reflect the methodology of the better practitioners of the Big Idea approach. First, Big Idea preachers insist on paying close attention to the literary genre and the literary artistry of the text. Bryan Chapell observes: "Many an error has been made by interpreting proverbs as promises, prophecy as history, parables as facts, and poetry as science."⁷ As early as 1984, Haddon Robinson taught preachers how to understand biblical narratives and encouraged them read Robert Alter's landmark book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.⁸ He also required his students to read a textbook on the literary genres of the Bible—*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart.

Second, it is misleading to cite a list of principles from 2 Samuel 11-12 in the *Life Essentials Study Bible* as an example of the Big Idea approach or its logical outcome.⁹ As Kuruvilla has rightly observed, the Big Idea approach hones in on "the essential core of what the author is saying."¹⁰ The genius of big idea preaching is to identify the "peg" on which all other ideas hang. Haddon Robinson often clarified a distortion of his view, pointing out that any Scripture text contains multiple ideas. However, good exegetes and preachers look for the unifying idea that holds the other ideas together.

Kuruvilla's deeper concern, though, is with "principlizing" versus "theologizing." I appreciate his pursuit of the "theological focus" of the text, and I grant that Big Idea preachers have not always defined the Big Idea—or the "timeless truth" or the "take home truth"—as a distillation of the text's theology as carefully as they could.¹¹ As Kevin Vanhoozer says, we "need to focus not on abstract principles alone but on concrete (canonical) universals" which reflect the Bible "in all its literary diversity."¹² My point is, 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.

Third, the best practitioners of Big Idea methodology are well aware of the danger Kuruvilla cites about losing the "specificity of a particular pericope." Kuruvilla is "convinced that no two biblical pericopes can ever have the same thrust or force."¹³ I remember Haddon Robinson critiquing students in class for "Big Idea" statements which were "too generic and would fit every other passage in the Bible."

However, the specificity problem is not unique to the Big Idea approach. Even Kuruvilla's methodology can fall prey to over-generalizing. Recently, I preached Judges 17-18. Towards the end of my sermon preparation process, I consulted Kuruvilla's fine commentary, *Judges: A Theological Commentary for Preachers*. His Theological Focus for Judges 17-18 is: "Godless leadership leads to godlessness in society that invites the discipline of God."¹⁴ This statement is

certainly true, but it is so general that it fits just about every narrative in the book of Judges! It does not reflect the specificity of this particular pericope—the problem of idols.¹⁵

It seems that a theological focus for Judges 17-18 needs to reflect at least two more exegetical details besides the dominant theme of idolatry. The second is the contrast between Micah's "house of God" (*beth 'elohim*) in 17:5 and "the house of God" (*ha-beth 'elohim*) in Shiloh which was available to worshipers the entire time (18:31). The third key exegetical detail is the effects of idolatry on both Micah and the Danites. Micah ended up with nothing (cf. 17:24). The Danites eventually ended up in captivity (cf. 18:30). Thus, I would offer the following Big Idea (or Theological Focus) for Judges 17-18: *When we turn from God to idols we miss the presence of God and experience emptiness or bondage.*

Before leaving this issue, it is worth noting that some overlap between big ideas (or distillations or theological foci) of multiple pericopes is inevitable since the same themes keep re-surfacing in the Scriptures. For example, the idea that *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble* shows up in Daniel 4, Luke 18:9-14, James 4:1-10, 1 Peter 5:5-7, and the story of Haman in the book of Esther.¹⁶ While multiple passages do not share the same *exact* thrust or force, they may share the same big idea.

THE BIG IDEA APPROACH DEPENDS ON EXEGETICAL RIGOR

Related to his first concern, Kuruvilla suggests that the quest for a distillation of a text may cause Big Idea sympathizers to "neglect critical exegetical observations" that clue the interpreter into a particular biblical text's thrust and force.¹⁷ He cites Paul Borden's exegetical idea and timeless proposition for 2 Samuel 11-12 as an example:¹⁸

Exegetical idea: David learns to accept what the grace of God gives him and what the grace of God does not.

Preaching Idea: Believers must learn to accept what God's grace has given them and what God's grace does not.

The exegetical clues this idea allegedly misses include the chiasmic structure of 2 Samuel 11-12, the incompatibility between David and Yahweh (who decides what is evil and what is good), the contrast between the Jewish king and the Hittite soldier, the "send" motif, the "take" motif, and the blot on David's reign.

However, the actual sermon Paul Borden preached on this text shows that these criticisms are unfounded.¹⁹ Borden's entire sermon is built on the contrast between the Jewish king and the Hittite soldier. It also deals with the blot on David's reign, and it takes into account the "take" motif (David took what God's grace did not give him). While the sermon does not highlight the "send" motif, it hardly runs contrary to it. Whether or not an exegetical analysis of 2 Samuel 11-12 needs to reflect the chiasmic structure Kuruvilla proposes is open to debate.

Kuruvilla provides a "theological focus" statement for 2 Samuel 11-12 in his book, *Privilege the Text!* His statement reads: "Reverence for God and deference to his word is manifested in the reined exercise of power, the restriction of self-indulgent passions, and the recognition of evil as reprehensible in the sight of God; this respect for the authority and rulership of the true sovereign brings blessing."²⁰ It should be apparent that without a sermon manuscript or an exegetical summary of the passage, Kuruvilla's "theological focus" statement could be open to the same criticism of neglect which he leveled against Borden's.

My point here is not to argue which statement is more accurate. It is simply to observe that without a sermon manuscript or a summary of the preacher's exegetical observations, it is not easy to assess how well or how poorly a distillation reflects solid exegesis. After all, a big idea is not a sermon! 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. Thus, it will not work to use Borden's big idea as evidence that the Big Idea approach fails to observe the exegetical nuances of the text.²¹

I suspect that the disparity between Kuruvilla's "Theological Focus" statement and the Big Idea statement of Borden reflects the difficulty of biblical narrative rather than diverse hermeneutical approaches. It is a reminder of the need for rigorous exegesis—something that both Kuruvilla and Borden model so well. As D. A. Carson has stated, "We are dealing with God's thoughts: we are obligated to understand them truly and to explain them clearly."²²

THE BIG IDEA APPROACH SERVES AUTHORIAL INTENT— BOTH ITS "SAYINGS" AND "DOINGS"

Kuruvilla rightly reminds us that communication of any kind involves "a communicator *doing* something with what is communicated. Authors, including those of Scripture, *do* things with what they say."²³ (838). This distinction between "semantics" and "pragmatics" is a recurring theme in modern linguistics—particularly in "Speech-Act Theory."²⁴ Semantics has to do with the meaning of sayings. Pragmatics has to do with the usage or function of sayings.

Take, for example, the following saying: *There is a car coming.*²⁵ Semantically, this statement means that a four-wheeled vehicle powered by a gasoline engine is moving down the street and coming closer. Pragmatically, the statement can function either as a warning or as an encouragement. If my young grandchildren are playing ball in the front yard, the statement functions as a warning to keep away from the street. If they are hungry and not-so-patiently waiting for a pizza delivery, then the saying functions as an encouragement.

Kuruvilla contends that Big Idea preaching follows the lead of classical rhetoric, functioning more as an argument than a demonstration. Kuruvilla says: “The Theological Focus is a reduction of what the author is *doing*—pericopal theology, the pragmatics of the text. The Big Idea, on the other hand, is a distillation of what the author is saying, the semantics of the text.”²⁶

But this is too simplistic. Big Idea preachers are aware of pragmatics as well as semantics. I remember a class with Haddon Robinson in which he assigned Mark 4:35-41—Jesus’ calming of the storm—as a preaching text. Robinson noted that preachers often settle for a big idea like: *God will get you through the storms of life when you have faith in Him.* Or, some preachers might opt for a big idea like this: *Jesus possesses unlimited power over the most powerful forces in the universe.* However, Robinson observed that Mark uses a time reference (“That day when evening came,” 4:35) to link the story 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.* While Robinson did not use the language of “semantics/pragmatics” or “locution/illocution/perlocution” (Speech Act Theory), he certainly recognized the need to discern what the author is doing what what he is saying.

Ostensibly, any Big Idea or Theological Focus statement looks more like a saying (semantics) than a doing (pragmatics). Kuruvilla’s Theological Focus Statements for 2 Samuel 11-12 and Judges 17-18 are no exception.

I am convinced that 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.

THE BIG IDEA APPROACH REQUIRES HOMILETICAL PROWESS

Kuruvilla sees “reductions” (distillations such as his Theological Focus) as having “a specific, narrow, and circumscribed use for them—in sermon *preparation*, not necessarily in sermon delivery.”²⁷ Kuruvilla suggests, per a quote from Thomas

Long, that Big Idea preachers have “been trained to leave the exegetical sleuthing in the study, to filter out the zest of that discovery, and to carry only processed propositions across to the other side. The joy of ‘Eureka!’ becomes, in the sermon, the dull thud of ‘My thesis [Big Idea] for this morning is’”²⁸

I agree with Kuruvilla that this is unfortunately true in far too many pulpits, on far too many Sundays. However, while Long’s statement about the way Big Idea preachers are trained makes for a great sound bite, it generalizes too broadly. I remember hearing Duane Litfin—a Big Idea preacher—encourage preachers to take their listeners over the “same set of tracks” they followed in their exegetical study of a passage. This is precisely what Kuruvilla believes preachers should do: “let their listeners encounter and experience the text as they themselves did when they were studying the text (i.e. before they crafted a Big Idea).”

Kuruvilla is right that the Theological Focus—and, I would add, the Big Idea—“can never be a stand-in for the text to ferry the experience of the text + theology to listeners.”²⁹ Still, we help our listeners when we can offer a Big Idea 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. This does not mean succumbing to a dull lead-in like “My big idea for this sermon is X.” That is a beginner mistake. I remember Haddon Robinson challenging his students to be as subtle as possible in presenting the sermon’s Big Idea.

It took me awhile to recognize that Robinson’s methodology—breaking a Big Idea into its component parts (subject and complement) and analyzing it with three functional questions—is a way of thinking, not some kind of a cookie-cutter approach that leads to bland sermons. He provided the methodology out of a quest to help preachers think themselves clear and preach clearly. Yet he employed it in service to the text—not as some kind of straightjacket into which a preaching text must fit.

CONCLUSION

In his article, Kuruvilla offers an intriguing analogy of what he believes that Big Idea preachers do to the text. Following the lead of the Viennese music theorist, Heinrich Schenker, Kuruvilla analyzes the “underlying structure of the 1939 hit, “Over the Rainbow.” He shows how that haunting melody could be distilled to a descending F-major scale—F, E, D, C, B-flat, A, G, F.³⁰ This is a clever illustration, but it badly distorts what competent Big Idea preachers do when they identify or preach the Big Idea of the text.

Let me suggest another musical analogy. James R. Gaines tells the story of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Musical Offering*—a sixteen movement piece he

produced for Frederick the Great. During an evening with the Prussian king in May of 1747, Bach received a musical challenge. Frederick gave him a complex theme with twenty-one notes and asked him to use it as the basis for a three-part fugue. Bach met this difficult challenge on the spot. Then, Frederick raised the stakes. He challenged Bach to a seemingly impossible task—the creation of a six-part fugue on the same theme.

Two weeks later, Bach emerged from his composing room with a sixteen-movement piece. It consisted of the six-part fugue along with ten canons placed around the Royal Theme. Gaines describes how Bach's *Musical Offering* issued a scathing attack on the lifestyle and values of the young king. Bach used the ten canons to invoke the Ten Commandments and refer to the Law. One of these canons even functions as a musical equivalent of an optical illusion. When played six times, the canon returns to where it began, only an octave higher. Bach inscribed this canon with these words: "As the notes ascend, so may the glory of the king."³¹ Yet the genius of this canon is that it does not seem to rise at all. This is Bach's comment on the glory of Frederick.

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: "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."³²

I walked away from Gaines' book, *Evening in the Palace of Reason*, stirred by the entire narrative and all of its intrigue and suspense. 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. When done properly, that's what Big Idea preaching does. It does so for the purpose of preaching the biblical text in a way that leads to life transformation and conformity to the image of Christ.

Perhaps it is not time to change methods.

NOTES

1. Abraham Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61:4 (2018): 825. You can read Kuravilla's article and his rejoinder to my response at <http://homiletix.com/kill-the-big-idea/>.

2. In fact, I was tempted to refer to him throughout this article as “Abe” because of my affection for him as a friend and as a brother in Christ. But referring to him by his last name is standard protocol in a venue like this.
3. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 844.
4. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 829.
5. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 833.
6. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 829.
7. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 62.
8. Haddon Robinson, “Preaching from Biblical Narratives—Interview: Paul Borden/Haddon Robinson,” *Expositives Set III*, #2 (1984, Denver Seminary), Side 1.
9. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 829-30.
10. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 827.
11. I have tried to address this elsewhere in my comments on preaching Old Testament narrative texts: “[W]e cannot pit propositional against narrative. Nor can we assume that narrative texts do not contain propositions. Rather, we must recognize that the narratives of the Hebrew Bible communicated theology. To be sure, the communication is subtle. But we cannot confuse subtlety with non-propositional” (Steve D. Mathewson, “Prophetic Preaching from Old Testament Narrative Texts,” in *Text Message: The Centrality of Scripture in Preaching*, ed. Ian Stackhouse and Oliver D. Crisp [Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014], 35).
12. Kevin Vanhoozer, “A Response to Walter C. Kaiser Jr.,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 61.
13. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 834.
14. Abraham Kuruvilla, *Judges: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), 264.
15. The two-part epilogue of Judges, of which Judges 17-18 forms part one, mirrors the prologue. The prologue deals with the problem of the wars of “destruction” (1:1-2:5) and the problem of idols (2:6-3:6), while the epilogue deals with these problems in reverse order. Judges 17-18 re-raises the problem of idols, while Judges 19-21 focuses on the problem of the wars of “destruction” (which Israel is now carrying on against itself).
16. I am grateful to Scott Wenig for providing me with this example.
17. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 831.
18. Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” 830. I co-authored this chapter with Paul Borden, but Borden gets the credit for this Big Idea statement.

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19. A manuscript of Paul Borden's sermon on 2 Samuel 11-12 appears in Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 190-199.
 20. Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege The Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 126, 146.
 21. For a Big Idea proposal for 2 Samuel 11-12 that contains considerable overlaps with Kuruvilla's Theological Focus statement for the same text, see Scott Wenig, "A Different Exegetical and Homiletical Approach to a Prominent Biblical Narrative: Interpreting and Preaching 2 Samuel 11-12," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 10:2 (September 2010): 15.
 22. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996): 15.
 23. Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea?," 838.
 24. For a helpful (and readable!) discussion of how biblical exegetes can utilize Speech Act Theory in their study of the biblical text, see C. John Collins, *Reading Genesis Well* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 51.
 25. I have adapted this example from P. H. Matthews, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* (2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 313.
 26. Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea?," 845.
 27. Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea?," 844.
 28. Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea?," 843.
 29. Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea?," 845
 30. Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea?," 831-32.
 31. James R. Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 235.
 32. Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason*, 237.