

A Response to “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” by Abraham Kuruvilla

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Abraham Kuruvilla is a leading thinker in evangelical homiletics. Those of us who interact with Abe at the meetings of the Evangelical Homiletics Society know that we are engaging a first-class mind and a warm spirit. We appreciate the opportunity to agree and disagree with him in this paper. Of course, the purview of our paper falls more into the “disagree” column of the ledger, but let us begin with some agreements.

Areas of Agreement

The artistic nature of biblical literature. Many homileticians, liberal and conservative, have awakened to what the Bible-as-literature folks have been saying for decades—the Bible is literature! In “Time To Kill?” (as well as in his commentaries and homiletics textbook, *A Manual for Preaching*) Kuruvilla shows awareness and appreciation for the Bible’s affective, formal, and imaginative qualities, and he shows skill in exegeting those slippery yet indispensable components of authorial intention: “The text, with all the nuances of its language, structure, and form, is a *stained-glass* window that the reader must look *at*.”¹

To illustrate and argue this point, Kuruvilla uses the analogy of “Over the Rainbow.”² This classic, and each performer’s interpretation of it, generates its own experience and associations. Something *would* be lost if it were reduced to a proposition. Art sits uncomfortably in the constricting garments of distillation. As Kuruvilla says, if the articulation of a Big Idea is the only way to understand a text, then “it is impossible to experience a piece of music, a painting, a poem, or even a person.”³ He calls on preachers to use “artistic inference” as part of their exegesis.⁴

We will have more to say about this below, but for now, Kuruvilla’s point stands: the Bible is literary art and we cannot experience art fully simply by summarizing it in a proposition.

The devotees of the Big Idea have overstated their case. Kuruvilla quotes a battalion of homileticians who advocate propositionalizing the text, and he is unafraid to stand toe-to-toe against the host. Kuruvilla *contra mundum*. The authors of this paper have not looked at the context of each of these quotations, but if the battalion does, in fact, say that the *only* way to understand a text is by abstracting and reducing it, then we agree: they go too far.

We wonder, however, if the same authors also assert the importance of experiencing the text’s power and pathos. Haddon Robinson may be typical: “The Bible is great literature. It speaks to

¹ Abraham Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 4 (December 2018): 831 [emphasis original].

² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 832-33.

³ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 836.

⁴ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 841.

our minds and to our emotions. . . . The authors want us to get and to feel what they are writing about. When they include details, they do so for a purpose.”⁵ This sounds like it could be lifted straight from “Time To Kill?”

We would also mention in passing that Robinson developed his homiletic in the 1960s and 70s, and he faced his own battalion. Robinson *contra mundum*. At that time, Bible-believing preachers practiced either thematic sermons or verse-by-verse commentary. The first kind of sermon connected points somewhat arbitrarily on a theme (1. The power of prayer, 2. The priority of prayer, 3. The people of prayer), and the second kind of sermon was simply oral commentary. Robinson may have swung the pendulum too far when he insisted that authors unified every text around a central idea and that sermons should therefore be unified around those ideas, but Robinson’s work should be understood in its context.

We also note that Kuruvilla does not acknowledge Robinson’s (and Sunukjian’s, and even Chapell’s) actual preaching. They are in fact artists and curators who *do* respond to the details and ineffable qualities of the text. Perhaps Kuruvilla would say that they succeed in spite of their homiletical theory, but their preaching demonstrates that having a Big Idea does not *necessarily* gut the sermon of power and pathos.

Authors do things with language. Kuruvilla’s contention is spot on: “Communication . . . is now being recognized as a communicator *doing* something with what is communicated.”⁶ To describe these doings, he uses the word “pragmatics” rather than the more familiar “rhetoric,” but we agree with his assertion. The playful illustration—“you are on my foot”—demonstrates the point.

So much for agreement (with filigrees of disagreement). We move now to the main purpose of the paper—our pragmatics—areas of disagreement.

Areas of Disagreement

Inconsistency. Kuruvilla argues with metonymic insistence that distillation eviscerates the text, yet he commends and practices distillation. He calls his own kind of distillation the “Theological Focus,” and it “serves as a label” that helps the preacher create a sermon.⁷ What is being labeled? Is the text ineffable or effable? Kuruvilla claims that the Theological Focus is not the same as the Big Idea even though both distill the text.⁸ He says that they differ in “derivation, structure,

⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 43.

⁶ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 838.

⁷ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 845.

⁸ In his growing corpus of commentaries, Kuruvilla provides a Theological Focus (distillate) for every pericope. At the time of writing, Jeffrey and a preaching team are preaching through Mark. We are using Abe’s commentary on Mark and profiting greatly from his curating of the text and especially from the distillates he provides. See Abraham Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

function, and context,”⁹ but they smell similar to us. In Kuruvilla’s system, articulating the author’s pragmatics (the Theological Focus) is crucial for the preacher because it enables him or her to put a label or handle on the text and focus on what the author is doing. Employing Ricoeur’s phrase, albeit imbuing it with his own meaning, Kuruvilla suggests that interpreters articulate a “world in front of the text.” Those articulations sound surprisingly like distillations. Kuruvilla asserts that 2 Samuel 11-12 can be distilled this way: “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.”¹⁰ According to Kuruvilla, this distillation helps preachers, but it is “naïve” or “perilous” to offer it to listeners,¹¹ for it denudes the text of power in sermon delivery. Propositionalizing the text therefore serves some limited purposes, and Kuruvilla is not “against reductions *per se* in homiletics,”¹² but distillation is good only for the goose/preacher, not for the gander/listener.¹³ The authors of this paper do not understand why it helps preachers to understand, experience, and curate authorial doings but obstructs listeners from the same.

Both-And, not Either-Or. Returning to the point above—the artistic nature of the Bible—we agree that the Bible is art, and yet we want to nuance our agreement. On the one hand something may be lost if we reduce a text merely to a Big Idea, but on the other hand, works of art are not simply ineffable, intuitive, and affective epiphanies. They also convey ideational content. Communication exists along a continuum from the highly artistic to the prosaic and informational:



Figure 1: Degree of Artistry in Communication

All biblical texts fall somewhere along this continuum. The psalms are highly artistic and are designed to prompt affective experience. Yet they are not pure art, like a string quartet. They

⁹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 845-46.

¹⁰ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 844. Aesop’s fable of the fox and crow has this “Theological” Focus: “Avoiding prideful gullibility to flattery prevents loss.” See Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Manual for Preaching: The Journey from Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 43. Ephesians 1:1-14 sounds like this when distilled: “God, who blesses his people, redeeming them for his grand plan to consummate all things in Christ, is worthy of being praised.” In Kuruvilla, *Manual*, 48.

¹¹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 836.

¹² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 844.

¹³ “The Theological Focus “simply functions as a label (or shorthand, title, or handle) for the theology for the benefit of sermon preparers . . . ; it is not to be inductively derived in preaching for the benefit of sermon listeners.” In Kuruvilla, *Manual*, 93.

contain ideas. The laws of Leviticus fall closer to the prosaic end of the continuum, and the book of Ruth falls somewhere between, perhaps closer to the artistic end.¹⁴ Kuruvilla agrees, arguing that texts have discursive and non-discursive elements,¹⁵ yet his repeated exhortation to curate the text to allow its power and pathos to overwhelm the audience treats texts as primarily non-discursive. In his zeal to point out the artistic qualities of texts, the pendulum has swung too far. Texts contain ideas and listeners are well served when the preacher who has studied, prayed through, meditated on, and imagined the text summarizes those ideas. *And* listeners are well served when the preacher recreates, embodies, and prompts what he or she has experienced in the study.

In other words, both *what* a biblical author means and *how* he means it matter. Yet Kuruvilla proposes that a listener's *experience* of the author's "doings" is not just *how* an author means, but also a part of *what* an author means.¹⁶ If this is true, then a change in the literary form of the text—or even in the wording, details, or structures of the text—alters the meaning of the text.¹⁷ Texts are therefore irreducible, and distillation is *necessarily* bad. The New Homiletic travelled this path decades ago. With a subtle change, Kuruvilla is asking evangelical preachers to travel it once more.

Kuruvilla's commitment to the notion that a text is an irreducible *objet d'art*¹⁸ has thus forced him to lodge with odd hermeneutical bedfellows—Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, Henry Mitchell, William Willimon, Paul Ricoeur, David James Randolph, David Buttrick—all of whom are liberal or neoorthodox in their doctrine of Scripture. But reductions are not necessarily reductionistic.¹⁹ Reductions, in fact, recognize a fundamental truth that Kuruvilla seemingly rejects: Neither that which authors "do" with their texts—*how* they mean what they mean—nor the listener's experience of the author's "doings," alter *what* the author means. To create a proposition from a text alters *how* an author means, and changes the rhetorical effects exerted

¹⁴ Kenneth Burke's theory of "form" may be helpful here. As a leading rhetorical critic in the twentieth century, Burke distinguished the "psychology of form" from the "psychology of information." See (*Counter-Statement* [1931]; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). The first appeals to us because of formal excellence (rhythm, sound, climax, repetition, etc.). The latter appeals because it teaches us new things. Music is pure form, containing no "information." Conversely, a dictionary definition has little beauty of form but appeals in another way because it provides information. All works of literature use both, but the force of each appeal varies according to how prosaic or how artistic the work is. When music (pure form) also possesses lyrics as in "Over the Rainbow," discursive information melds with non-discursive, lovely form. Visual art such as Gauguin's massive painting of Tahitian women in all stages of maturation from toddler to wizened matriarch, is mostly non-discursive; but to guide viewers in their interpretation of the masterpiece (something akin to a Big Idea), Gauguin wrote in the corner: "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"

¹⁵ Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill," 841.

¹⁶ Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill," 842.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuruvilla, "Big Idea—*Requiescat in Pace!* Authorial Rejoinder to Steven Mathewson," 7. Accessed at www.homiletix.com on 5 August 2019.

¹⁸ Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill," 845.

¹⁹ Steven D. Mathewson, "Let the Big Idea Live! A Response to Abraham Kuruvilla," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 19, no. 1 (March 2019): 34.

upon the reader, but it does not alter *what* the author means. A skillful communicator can retain *what* he or she says even when altering *how* he or she says it. To distill a text imparts the same *what* using a different *how*.

Kuruvilla's antithesis toward distillation likewise seems to us to strike at the practice of systematic theology. From the details of the text, comparing text with text, theologians identify broader principles—doctrines—that capture much of the detailed information pertaining to a given subject. If, as Kuruvilla asserts, the “uniqueness of wording and structure and context of any given passage renders it impossible for one pericope to have the same thrust/force as another,”²⁰ then no two passages of Scripture fundamentally address the same doctrine. The Bible offers no single doctrine of justification: there are multiple, unique, individual doctrines of justification, for no two pericopes teach the same theology. By redefining theology to include the listener's experience of the non-discursive, affective qualities of the text, Kuruvilla precludes the possibility of theology as traditionally understood, and forbids the preacher its use in the pulpit.

Distillation, however, is necessary, not only for the work of theology, but also because the people of God must be taught, and thus the Scripture shows that Jesus himself used propositions to clarify his meaning. In Mark 4:3-8 Jesus told the Parable of the Sower, and because his disciples did not understand it, he explained the parable in the form of reductions, that is, propositional statements that clarified what he meant. In fact, Mark reveals in verse 34 that “privately to his own disciples,” Jesus “explained everything.”²¹ Jesus used propositions to distill and clarify the meaning of a story, and contemporary preachers can use propositions too, for far from representing a loss of meaning, propositions employ a different *how* to clarify the same *what*.

Thus using an old technique of debate, Kuruvilla has employed the argument called “false dilemma”—*either* a text is impossible to summarize in a proposition, *or* it is only proposition.²² *Either* a preacher curates the text, recreating its power and pathos, *or* the preacher strips it of all life, leaving only the stain at the bottom of the teacup. But the Big Idea advocates we know do not preach that way nor do they conceive of exegesis that way. Both-and, not either-or.

Mischaracterizing of classical rhetoric. To bolster his case that Big Idea theory leads to sermons that lack power and pathos, implying that such sermons are dry, heady, insipid, or weak, Kuruvilla points out how Big Idea advocates draw on classical rhetoric. It is true that many of these homileticians earned doctorates in rhetoric (Robinson, Sunukjian, Chapell, Warren), but those doctoral studies have enlivened Big Idea preaching, helping it to be what Kuruvilla desires (curating the text's power and pathos). This is because rhetoric as a discipline is much more than argumentation. Kuruvilla knows this because he thinks highly of Gary Selby's *Not With Words*

²⁰ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 834.

²¹ All Scripture references in this paper reflect the English Standard Version of the Bible.

²² Wikipedia comments that this fallacy, also called “false dichotomy,” presents “two extreme points on some spectrum of possibilities.” It “gives the impression that the options are mutually exclusive of each other even though they need not be.”

of *Wisdom*, which draws on Longinus,²³ but Kuruvilla describes only the aspects of the art that help him kill the Big Idea, while neglecting aspects that help the preacher to curate the text's power and pathos.

But consider these facts about classical rhetoric: when discussing style in *Rhetoric*, Aristotle sends readers to *Poetics*. There he also discusses mythos (plot) as a companion of logos and pathos. Cicero places great emphasis on delivery, arguing that listeners match the emotional state of the speaker. Quintilian was an early theorist of “brain science” with his discussion of visualization (*evidentia*)—the way vivid language works to hold attention and create vicarious experience. The theory of *evidentia* was drawn from Greek rhetoric (*enargeia*). As mentioned above, Longinus's *On the Sublime* was part of classical rhetoric. In addition to forensic and deliberative oratory, epideictic was the third species of discourse discussed by Aristotle, Augustine, and many others. This kind of oratory stirs values already held by the audience. It does not teach new ideas or persuade listeners to change their minds. It is not an argument. When the purpose of a sermon is the stirring of memory, that sermon is more like epideictic than forensic or deliberative rhetoric. All of this is to say that Kuruvilla mischaracterizes classical rhetoric when he reduces it (distills it!) to argument. The classical rhetoricians did not, and advocates of Big Idea do not either.

Rhetoric expanded even more in the modern era (which is well-understood by many Big Idea theorists): George Campbell (early 19th century) walked in Quintilian's steps in describing how language with “vivacity” affects the “operations of the mind.” John Broadus, James Hoppin, Robert Dabney, and nearly every other 19th century homiletician applied Campbell to preaching. In the mid-20th century Chaim Perelman provided a tour de force with his “new rhetoric,” updating and expanding classical rhetoric. Also in the mid-20th century Kenneth Burke blended poetics, rhetoric, ethics, politics, and psychology in an attempt to describe how language functions.

Properly understood, classical rhetoric serves the very type of preaching Kuruvilla advocates, and his mischaracterization of it weakens his argument.

The Text *Qua* Text is Inadequate. Nineteenth century Congregationalist preacher, R.W. Dale, asked: “Have we any reason to believe that even intelligent Christian men and women read the Scriptures intelligently?”²⁴ His question contains his answer, and it is an answer that many preachers can confirm. The text *qua* text does not explain itself. Preachers must interpret and teach the Bible.

Kuruvilla insists that the text is “irreducible into any other form,”²⁵ yet he dramatically changes the text's form when moving from text to sermon. For example, in *A Manual for Preaching*, he

²³ Gary S. Selby, *Not With Words of Wisdom: Nonrational Persuasion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016).

²⁴ R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Libraries, 2015), 226. Originally published as *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877).

²⁵ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 831.

teaches students to re-communicate the text with an outline (“map”): “There is no constraint on the preacher to follow the textual sequence. . . . The kind of sermon map appropriate for the audience is something that must be decided preaching event by preaching event.”²⁶ Kuruvilla thus teaches a curator to distill the text when it comes to the sermon’s outline but not when it comes to the sermon’s central idea.

In like manner, he alters the text by expanding it from, say, the three minutes it takes to read it aloud to the thirty-eight minutes it takes to preach it. Kuruvilla’s “curation” is a much longer process than simply reading the text aloud and allowing the A/author to project a world in front of the text. We agree that this expansion is necessary in preaching, but we are pointing out that such expansion represents inconsistency in Kuruvilla’s thought.²⁷

Kuruvilla insists that Big Idea preaching “does not see texts as non-discursive *objets d’art*,”²⁸ but also suggests that the experiences produced in the reader by these non-discursive elements of the text are, in fact, inexpressible, such that human language cannot capture them, except by the text *qua* text. But preaching, which is more than mere reading of the text, necessarily employs human language. Kuruvilla’s argument is therefore oddly self-defeating. If the experience of the non-discursive, artistic “doings” of the text is inexpressible, and can only be experienced through the text *qua* text, then the preacher can do nothing but read the text, or point out particular details of the text, hoping that congregants will “experience” what the preacher believes they should.

Contrast that with Scripture. John describes with artistic skill several signs that Jesus performed, but in John 20:30-31 he writes: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John’s texts, which artfully describe Jesus’ signs, are more than art. They are discursive texts, intended to communicate information—a truth with which Kuruvilla no doubt agrees—and John summarizes his own texts with a propositional statement, teaching what they mean and how his readers should respond to Jesus. Whatever the experience a reader enjoys of the non-discursive elements of John’s texts as *objets d’art*, John purposes his narratives for more than listener “experience”—he purposes them to convince the reader that Jesus is the Christ. Kuruvilla’s insistence on the text *qua* text forbids the apostle from doing that which he clearly has done.

Moreover, when Peter preached at Pentecost, he employed Psalm 110:1, interpreting the text, teaching clearly what it meant and how it was fulfilled in Christ. So far from expecting the text *qua* text to teach his listeners, Peter understood that Psalm 110:1 had in fact been a mystery to Jews for centuries. “The LORD says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” How could David refer to his own descendant as “Lord?” Peter answered in verse 36, declaring, “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” *That* is why David called him, “Lord.” The descendant to whom David referred is the resurrected

²⁶ Kuruvilla, *Manuel*, 98.

²⁷ For Kuruvilla, altering the text in some ways helps it soar in the hearts of the listeners, but in one particular way—distillation and communication of a Big Idea—it cripples.

²⁸ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 845.

and reigning Christ. Peter did not fear that his propositional statement represented a “loss of meaning and power and pathos, not to mention attenuation of filigrees of structure and nuances of language”²⁹ because his purpose was to proclaim salvation, not to help his listeners experience the “filigrees” of Psalm 110.

Kuruvilla’s proposal specifically precludes the question of application, which he intends to treat elsewhere.³⁰ But one wonders why and how application could proceed under Kuruvilla’s conception of curation. Why seek to apply the text if its theology, which includes the listener’s “intangible experiences,”³¹ is in fact “inexpressible”³² in any other form than the text itself? If the preacher states the theology that his or her congregation is supposed to apply, the preacher has changed that theology *by* stating it. Kuruvilla is adamant that any change to a single word of the text alters its pericopal theology:³³ only the text *qua* text can express it. The preacher cannot retell the text,³⁴ summarize the text in his or her own words,³⁵ or state it as a proposition. Exactly what, then, can a preacher do to “apply” the text when any language other than the text *qua* text alters the very theology that the preacher purports to apply?

CONCLUSION

In describing his rejection of the Big Idea and turn toward preaching as curation, Kuruvilla asserts: “With the blossoming of language philosophy in the late twentieth century, our understanding of how language works has grown considerably.”³⁶ But that is not true. *Theories* of language have “grown considerably,” and each preacher and homiletician must submit those theories to the light of Scripture, searching the Bible to confirm or deny the accuracy of the theory in question. The way that Kuruvilla asks preachers to understand and to employ language in preaching simply does not reflect the way the Bible understands and employs it, and he appears uncritically to have accepted theories of language that simply do not agree with the Word of God.

We close where we began, by stating our appreciation of Abraham Kuruvilla as a keen homiletical theorist. Despite that appreciation, when Kuruvilla asks if it is “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” we urge evangelical preachers politely to reply, “No.”

²⁹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 835.

³⁰ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 835; see also “Time to Kill,” 839, note 85.

³¹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 841.

³² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 844.

³³ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*” 7. “[C]hanging any word in the account alters the text’s thrust in some way.”

³⁴ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*” 7.

³⁵ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*” 11. “No humanly created verbiage . . . can substitute for” the text.

³⁶ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 838.