

“Big Idea? DNR!” Authorial Rejoinder to Jeffrey Arthurs and Russell St. John

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I am thankful to Jeffrey Arthurs and Russell St. John for the time and resources invested in responding to my article, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?”¹ Unfortunately, Arthurs’ and St. John’s response comprise a cascade of immoderate misunderstandings; I will attempt to answer them all in this rejoinder, dividing my space and time to point out their misunderstandings of pragmatics, of language, of reductions, of curation, of “experience,” and of “borrowing.” I conclude with a fervent exhortation to allow the Big Idea patient, terminally ill, to give up the ghost, without troubling it any further!

Misunderstanding of Pragmatics

Firstly, there is a misunderstanding of pragmatics.

Arthurs and St. John argue that Haddon Robinson, the Dean of the Big Idea, did grasp notions of textual pragmatics when he said: “The Bible is great literature. It speaks to 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.”² I may grant that Robinson appreciated textual art, but art appreciation doesn’t go far enough.³ Textual art contributes significantly to the thrust of the text and my concern is with how that thrust may be facilitated for those listening to sermons. Big Ideaists simply distill the text (*sans* its art) and preach the distillate; I have a problem with that methodology:

I am registering my opposition to *distilling the text*: pericopal theology (irreducible) cannot be expressed in a Big Idea (a reduction) without crippling loss of power and pathos, and without denuding the text of its experience-creating thrust and force; a distillation of a text can never be an adequate substitute for the text. I am also objecting to *preaching the distillate*: I disagree that Big Idea distillates are what listeners of sermons should catch, that

¹ Jeffrey Arthurs and Russell St. John, “A Response to ‘Time to Kill the Big Idea?’ by Abraham Kuruvilla,” *Homiletix* (December 1, 2019), 1–8. Their response was a presentation at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, California, November 21, 2019. So was this rejoinder, though I have permitted myself the luxury of expanding my presentation into a detailed reply to Arthurs and St. John. Both these—Arthurs’ and St. John’s response and my rejoinder—as well as my original article and another response-rejoinder sequence, are available at <http://homiletix.com/kill-the-big-idea/>.

² Cited in Arthurs and St. John, “Response,” 2–3.

³ Robinson’s theological exegesis for pragmatics often left much to be desired. For a brief analysis of an example, see my discussion in Abraham Kuruvilla, “Big Idea—*Requiescat in Pace!* Authorial Rejoinder to Steven Mathewson,” *Homiletix* (August 1, 2019), 2–4.

these reductions are what preachers must preach, and that without them sermon listeners will never get what the text is about.⁴

But Arthurs and St. John continue to resist: "The Big Idea advocates we know do not preach that way nor do they conceive of exegesis that way."⁵ My respondents must be keeping better company than I am: I was referring only to Robinson and his homiletical progeny. And most of them, if not all, effectively insist that all the preacher needs to do is distill the text into a Big Idea (a lossless reduction, they claim⁶), and that all that listeners need to catch is that Big Idea. Here is Robinson on distilling the text: "You're simply trying to establish Paul's subject as he is writing to the Corinthians, and Paul's complement as he is writing to the Corinthians [i.e., the Big Idea proposition]."⁷ And here he is on preaching the distillate: "In the sermons I have preached that have been most effective, I will have stated my central idea five, six, seven times. . . . You want to drive it home. It's what a congregation is to remember."⁸ Likewise, Donald R. Sunukjian, an early Big Idea adopter: "Each address crystallizes into a single sentence which expresses the sum and substance of the whole [textual] discourse."⁹ And, again: "[The Big/Main Idea] is what you [the preacher] want them [the 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*."¹⁰ This is nothing but boiling down the coffee (distilling the text) and preaching the stain in the bottom of the cup (preaching the distillate).¹¹

The operations of Big Ideaists counter what they might say on occasion about the Bible being great literature and art. In the final analysis, they think that the thrust of the literary and artistic biblical text can be conveyed through a bald reduction or distillation of the text. In the writings of those Big Idea devotees I've quoted in my article, I am yet to see anything that evidences a clear understanding of pragmatics/authorial *doings*—what it is, how it functions, and the means of sermonically mediating it from text to audience. But why blame these homileticians? The entire field of pragmatics in language philosophy has been ignored by most Bible scholars and commentators. Even Bible translators have been negligent. Let me give you an example:

⁴ Abraham Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61 (2018): 843–44 (emphases added). Now, I *don't* have problems with a text having a single thrust, the unified force of everything its author intended for the text to *do*: its meaning, power, pathos, vitality, impact—*everything* the author is *doing* in and with the text (what I call "pericopal theology"). My gripe is only with the reduction of the text+thrust into a seemingly lossless propositional sentence, the Big Idea (distilling the text), and the claim that that Big Idea is what must be passed on in a sermon to listeners (preaching the distillate).

⁵ "Response," 5.

⁶ As a matter of fact, Arthurs and St. John echo this assertion; see below.

⁷ Haddon W. Robinson, "Unity, Order, Progress 770000," 21:30–21:41 (part of a collection of archival video recordings in my possession that were made at Dallas Seminary in the 1970s).

⁸ Haddon W. Robinson, "Better Big Ideas: Five Qualities of the Strongest Preaching Ideas," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators* (eds. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 357.

⁹ "Patterns for Preaching: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Sermons of Paul in Acts 13, 17, and 20" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1972), 176.

¹⁰ "Common Ground-1," 07:19–08:17 (emphasis mine; this archival video recording, that was also made at Dallas Seminary in the 1970s, is in my possession). Yes, the Big Idea is *El Supremo*, the emperor, but, pray, where are the emperor's clothes?

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

Take the story of the destruction of the wicked Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. The prophet Samuel passes along God's message to King Saul that he should annihilate the Amalekites, prefacing his remarks with: "Now listen to the *voice* [קוֹל, *qol*] of the word of Yahweh" (15:1). Unfortunately, we do not find "voice" in most of our English Bibles. Such a literal translation of the Hebrew is found only in the King James version and its heirs. The seeming redundancy of "voice" is swept under the rug in all other major English translations that essentially have: "Listen to the word(s) of Yahweh." Hold that thought.

Saul, as you know, does not obey: rather than eliminate all the animals and humans, as commanded, he saves the good ones of the former and the chief of the latter, probably as trophies for himself and his army. Soon after, Samuel confronts Saul. The king declares he has done everything that God told him to do. Whereupon the prophet issues a memorable indictment: "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of oxen which I hear?" (15:14 NAS; similar in most other English translations). But it's not "bleating" and "lowing" in the Hebrew. Can you guess what it is?

Yes, it's *voice* (again קוֹל): "What then is this *voice* of the sheep in my ears, and the *voice* of the oxen which I hear?" (15:14). Did you catch the thrust or force of the text? The author is *doing* something here. God is poking us in the sternum and asking: "Which voice are you listening to—mine, or that of the seductions and allures of world?"

With almost every English translation reading "bleating" and "lowing" in 15:14, and with the omission of "voice" from 15:1, the force/thrust/impact of the text is almost completely negated! Not even translators have looked at the text the way it was meant to be looked at, or seen in the text what the author intended to be seen. The pragmatics of the text not only remains untouched but, by their neglect, translators have undercut the power of the text. And these rookie errors continue to be perpetrated blithely by Bible scholars. No wonder the humble homiletician ends up following their lead and ignoring pragmatics.

So while Robinson and Sunukjian and Arthurs and St. John and I and everyone else occasionally have our flashes of brilliance when we do things right unwittingly, there has never been a careful examination of scriptural texts, pericope by pericope and book by book, for their authorial *doings*. For that matter, neither has there been any rigorous exposition of a hermeneutic that would undergird such an exploration of authorial *doings* in Scripture.¹² And I submit that without such an understanding of the thrust of the text (pericopal theology), there can be no arriving at valid application.¹³ Yes, there is a misunderstanding of pragmatics and its deployment in biblical hermeneutics for homiletics. And this misunderstanding leads naturally to another misconstrual.

¹² Arthurs and St. John note that "Kuruvilla does not acknowledge Robinson's (and Sunukjian's, and even Chapell's) actual preaching. . . . Perhaps Kuruvilla would say that they succeed in spite of their homiletical theory" ("Response," 2). That is close to the truth, I'm afraid. And, yes, I restricted myself to what these preachers have written and taught about homiletics, hopefully the result of much reflection and serious thought on their part. Such writings and teachings are usually far better gauges of what these pulpiteers are thinking as they craft their own sermons. Analysis of the sermons themselves may not yield much information on the inner workings of their creators' minds (however, see below).

¹³ For more on pericopal theology and valid application, I refer readers to my monographs, especially *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013); *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015); and *A Manual for Preaching: The Journey from Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019). A number of my commentaries for preachers, on Genesis, Judges, Mark, and Ephesians, may also be helpful for understanding my hermeneutic; in these, I lead the reader pericope by pericope, discerning the authorial *doing* (thrust/pericopal theology) in each.

Misunderstanding of Language

Secondly, and as a result of the first, there is the misunderstanding of language itself.

And this is their fatal error! According to Arthurs and St. John, “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. 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.”¹⁴ Yes, yes, yes—it does! But, unfortunately (for them), Arthurs and St. John do not agree: “To create a proposition from a text alters *how* an author means, and changes the rhetorical effects exerted upon the reader, but it does not alter *what* the author means.”¹⁵ Did you get that? Changing *how* an author means something does not change *what* the author means. The *how* apparently does not affect the *what*, and does not contribute to textual (or utterance) meaning, only serving as some kind of rhetorical flim-flam, just gaudy glitter on the text (or utterance)! In other words, Arthurs and St. John want to sever the relationship between *how* something is written/said from *what* is written/said.

This is Big Ideaists’ self-inflicted lethal stab at the heart of their own enterprise. And that alone ruins their whole game and undermines all the castles they are building in the air. It reveals a gross misunderstanding of how language works, because *how* things are spoken, written, sung, or drawn *does* affect the *what* of that utterance, text, song, or picture. Surely Arthurs and St. John know that—they’re married men: *how* one says something contributes to the meaning of *what* one says! In fact, everything in the text, and everything that the text is, contributes to the meaning—*everything*: vocabulary and syntax (that make up the authorial saying, or semantics), and wordplays and structure and the rest (that point to the authorial *doing*, or pragmatics). And so, any change in the text will change how the text was intended by its author to be experienced by its readers.¹⁶ Depending on the alteration, the resulting change and effect may be small or big, but—make no mistake—the *what* of the text will change! Everything in a text contributes to the meaning, impact, force, thrust (pericopal theology)—and thus the author-intended experience—of the text.

The other day, Arthurs visited Beijing with his wife and got lost on the streets of that fair metropolis; so he went up to a stranger intending to say to her: “wǒ xiǎng wèn nǐ” (“I want to ask you”). Instead he said: “wǒ xiǎng wěn nǐ” (“I want to kiss you”). Arthurs, bless his romantic heart, got a slap from the stranger on his left cheek, and another from his wife, on his right. How one says something contributes to the meaning of what is said.¹⁷

If you thought this kind of stuff works only in Chinese and only when spoken, you’d be mistaken. In Hebrew, the normal word order for a verbal sentence is Verb-Subject-Object (VSO). For example: וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נֹחַ (wayyizkor ’elohim ’et-noakh) = “And-he-remembered [V]—God [S]—Noah [O]” (Gen 8:1). If that order is switched to Subject-Verb-Object (SVO, as

¹⁴ “Response,” 4 (emphases original).

¹⁵ “Response,” 4–5 (emphases original).

¹⁶ More on “experience,” below.

¹⁷ Even if one argues that *wèn* and *wěn* are different words, the fact remains that *how* one says something changes *what* one means. Incidentally, there is a classical Chinese essay, written by linguist and poet Zhao Yuanren (1892–1982), made up entirely of ninety-eight instances of *shi* uttered in different ways. It ends with *shi shi shi* (= “try to explain this matter”). That’s exactly what I’d like to ask Arthurs and St. John: “*Shi shi shi shi!*” See Wolfgang Behr, “G. Sampson, ‘A Chinese Phonological Enigma’: Four Comments,” *The Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 43 (2015): 726. To appreciate the fascinating vocalization of the words of this essay, make your way to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=509ad4eCL40#t=0h0m0s> (accessed November 1, 2019).

is normal in English), the emphasis is on the subject, as in: וְנֹחַ מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה (wnoakh matsa' khen b'eyney yhwah) = “But-Noah [S] found [V] favor [O] in-the-eyes of-Yahweh” (Gen 6:8)—i.e., Noah did, not any of the other nefarious characters in Genesis 6:1–8.¹⁸ How one says something contributes to the meaning of what is said.

Such emphases in spoken utterances and scripted texts are critical to figuring out what the author is saying and *doing*. They are essential to the thrust, force, impact, and experience of texts (and their theologies). Here is an English example: “I never said you stole my wallet.” Try saying that seven-word sentence seven times, each time emphasizing a different word. You have just said seven different things.¹⁹ How one says something contributes to the meaning of what is said.²⁰

This reality of the *how* contributing to the *what* (meaning, thrust, force, impact, i.e., theology of the pericope and the authorially intended experience of the text) is what I've been advocating for all along. In a written text, we don't have tones or vocal emphases, of course. But we do have a lot of clues to what the author is emphasizing (what the author *doing*, the thrust/theology of the text) in the text's wordplays, word choices, chiasms, sequences, structures, alliterations, puns, repetitions—all kinds of filigrees of structure and nuances of language—all of which are disparaged and disdained by Arthurs' and St. John's (and most Big Ideaists') severance of the *how* and *what* of a text. This is nothing but a misbegotten notion of language.

Remember my 1 Samuel 15 example earlier? Look at what the translators did by omitting “voice [קוֹל, qol]” in one place, and turning it into “bleating” and “lowing” in another: they crippled the force and thrust of the text, drastically altering the authorially intended experience of the text by readers.²¹ The *how* and *what* of texts (or utterances) are inextricably intertwined and in a unified, forceful, hermeneutical fervor, they contribute to the meaning, thrust, force, and impact of the text, its pericopal theology (and thus its experience, as intended by the author, as well as the resulting response to it by readers). How you say things matter, and contributes to the meaning of what is said!

But one of Robinson's associates, Duane Litfin, got it perfectly right, when he acknowledged in a preaching class:

Suppose that Winston Churchill, at the end of the Battle of London, at the end of WWII, would have said, “We ought to be grateful to our air force.” Well, he would've been right on the heroic efforts of the RAF during the Battle of London, where Britain was within a week or two of collapsing under the Nazi onslaught. Just a few men had held off the Luftwaffe, almost singlehandedly. Amazing feat of endurance, of heroics! And at the end of that, if Churchill would have stood up and said, “We ought to be grateful to our air force,” everybody would have sort of yawned and said, “Yeah, well, we sure should.” And his words would've been forgotten within the hour, much less the next day. Instead, what he said was: “Never in the field of human conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few.” As long as the history of Western culture is kept, that sentence will be remembered, because of the memorable way in which it was said. And what's the difference? At one level,

¹⁸ This also explains the common English translation of the initial ו (waw) in Gen 6:8 as “but,” instead of “and,” as in translations of Gen 8:1.

¹⁹ Modified from Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 85.

²⁰ Indeed, the same text in two different contexts will have a different thrust in each locus: “Love all” means one thing in a church sermon; it means something entirely different on Wimbledon's Centre Court.

²¹ Consequently, readers are left without any basis to move towards valid application of that pericope.

you can say they’re saying the same thing. At another level, the one says so much more than the other because it has a *communicational impact* that the other simply doesn’t have.²²

That’s exactly it: “communicational impact,” the experience of the text—all of it, semantics *and* pragmatics—made possible in part by *how* the utterance was said. The *how* contributes vitally to the *what!*

And here’s Robinson himself, in his foreword to one of Arthurs’ books: “To begin to appreciate the meaning of Daniel or Revelation [the *what*], we have to understand the literary form [the *how*].”²³ Of course! How you say things matter, and contributes to meaning! Permit me to quote Arthurs, himself, in the same book: “Form [a *how*] is not simply the husk surrounding the seed, superfluous and cumbersome; it is more like the architectural design of the Vietnam Memorial, *inseparable from meaning and impact* [the *what*].” Yes! And again: “The rhetorical significance of [metaphor—another *how*] is subtle but profound . . . , *producing the meaning the author intends* [the *what*].”²⁴ Yes, again! *How* something is said changes the *what*—its intended meaning, its intended thrust, its intended force, its intended impact, its intended effect, and its intended experience (not to mention the intended response to it). And as I noted, *how* something is said includes everything in the text—*everything*: grammar, vocabulary, syntax, form, structure, context, and all the literary clues in the text. All these *hows* change the *what*. How you say things matter, and contributes to the meaning of what is said!

So Arthurs’ and St. John’s divorcing of *what* authors mean from *how* they mean it is a fatal error. They continue: “A skillful communicator can retain *what* he or she says even when altering *how* he or she says it. To distill a text [the Big Idea *MO*] imparts the same *what* using a different *how*.”²⁵ Apparently, “a skillful communicator” can boil down a large body of text with hundreds of words into the few words of a Big Idea proposition, and this manmade distillate would still mean what the divinely inspired text meant, with the same pathos, punch, potency, and power: after all, according to Big Idea votaries, distillation is a lossless reduction (distilling the text). And if that can be done, why then, of course Big Idea preachers need only ensure that that bald distillate is caught by listeners (preaching the distillate). Fatal error! If it didn’t really matter *how* God said something, then why did he bother with plenary verbal inspiration? Let’s try cutting out Psalm 23 and substituting it with a Big Idea distillate of the song created by “skillful communicators” like Messrs. Arthurs and St. John. What would that do for you? Or 1 Samuel 15: What happens if you eliminate the wordplays of “voice”? Try putting that in any other form and see if it has the same impact, thrust, force, and experience. Oh, wait—translators have already done that!²⁶

²² Duane Litfin, “Style 800520,” 05:21–05:46 (emphasis added; this archival video recording made at Dallas Seminary in the 1970s is also in my possession).

²³ Haddon W. Robinson, “Foreword,” in Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 12.

²⁴ Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 25, 47 (emphases added).

²⁵ “Response,” 5 (emphases original).

²⁶ Despite Robinson’s declarations, he and his protégés testify to this undoing of inspiration in their homiletical offerings. One of Robinson’s most famous (and favorite) sermons, one that he preached over and over for more than three decades, was *The World’s Best Love Story*, on the book of Hosea (transcript available at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/january/bestlovestory.html> [accessed November 1, 2019]). It is almost entirely a retelling of the biblical story in Robinson’s own words (with only 7 verses quoted directly, comprising 300 words out of the sermon’s 4300 words), ostensibly unveiling his Big Idea: “God does not love you because of what you are. God does not love you because of what you do. God always loves you in spite of what you are, in spite of what you do.” Accordingly, Robinson confessed that when he preaches narrative texts,

Communication is not just black marks on vellum, parchment, or paper. It is an event. And to get the full impact, thrust, force, and experience of the event, everything—*everything!*—that makes up the text must be taken into consideration, its semantics *and* its pragmatics. As I affirmed, the authorially intended thrust changes with the alteration of even a single word of the text. Maybe a little, maybe a lot, but the thrust/theology *will* change.²⁷ That's why we needed plenary verbal inspiration of Scripture, for were the words not inspired in that particular fashion, the precise A/authorially intended thrusts of biblical pericopes would not have been achieved.²⁸ All that to say, if one follows Arthurs and St. John, one concludes that plenary verbal inspiration is for the birds! This is proof of my respondents' muddled thinking, the homiletical outcome of which does God a disservice, his word a disservice, and his people a disservice. I wonder if Arthurs and St. John understand how language works, how texts work, or even how Scripture works.

Misunderstanding of Reductions

Thirdly, Arthurs and St. John reveal their misunderstanding of reductions and—at least from my point of view—the right way to use them in homiletics. Of course, this misrepresentation is to be expected since, based on their view of pragmatics and of language, reductions of texts are effectively lossless, and plenary verbal inspiration has thereby been rendered redundant.

Notice Arthurs' and St. John's objection: "Kuruvilla argues with metonymic insistence that distillation eviscerates the text, yet he commends and practices distillation."²⁹ Yes, but my respondents fail to recognize that I argue that distillations *not* be used as Big Ideaists use them—as supposedly adequate and seemingly lossless substitutes for texts. Unlike Big Idea devotees, I practice distillation for an entirely different purpose: to help me, the sermon preparer, shape a sermon. I don't see any "inconsistency" in my using reductions quite differently (and for a different purpose altogether) than how Big Ideaists use theirs.³⁰ Something proscribed for one purpose, can be prescribed for another, can it not? I might prohibit a patient of mine from applying over-the-counter hydrocortisone to her athlete's foot (hydrocortisone would make it worse). But I'd applaud her tendency to use the same drug for the eczema on her hands (hydrocortisone would make it better).

So, yes, there are all kinds of *good* uses of reductions in homiletics. For instance, I recommend that preachers, at least in the early part of their careers, use the Theological Focus (my reduction of pericopal theology) to create a map of the sermon (as my article suggested). Take 1 Samuel 15 again; here is a passable Theological Focus of the verses we looked at: *The child of God listens to God's voice, rather than to the voices of the seductions of the world to*

"I will spend time telling the story. In a 40-minute message, I might take 15 minutes to tell that story [though, in the case of his Hosea sermon, Robinson took almost all his preaching time!]. ... Coming out of that story, I will say, 'There is one great principle [Big Idea] that emerges from that story. And I will state that principle. And then I will try to apply that principle to life'" ("Structures, Etc. 770000," 1:04:50–1:05:15 [from an archival recording made at Dallas Seminary; in my possession]). No question: the inspired words of Scripture don't particularly matter!

²⁷ So when Arthurs and St. John assert, "Kuruvilla is adamant that any change to a single word of the text alters its pericopal theology: only the text *qua* text can express it," they are absolutely right: I am ("Response," 8).

²⁸ Also, if the Big Idea were the important thing from the text that listeners were to catch, why didn't God just give us a series of Big Ideas in his word, instead of troubling us with sappy poetry, sentimental narratives, arcane prophecies, and inane laws?

²⁹ "Response," 2.

³⁰ Arthurs and St. John, "Response," 2.

generate *God’s displeasure*. You can create a decent sermon map from this, simply by splitting the Theological Focus into three and allocating each to a sermon move (plus a fourth move for application).³¹

- I. God’s voice (and his command to Saul)
- II. World’s voice (and Saul’s disobedience)
- III. Consequence (God’s displeasure)
- IV. Application

In fact, in a paper presented at another academic conference a few years ago, Arthurs and his co-author actually suggested that a reduction “helps suggest the sermon’s structure.”³² Indeed!

But unlike what Big Ideaists routinely assert, as they misunderstand the legitimate use of reductions, I would argue that such distillations *cannot* capture the entirety of the text (or its thrust) without loss, and therefore those lossy distillates, Big Ideas, are *not* the important things listeners ought to be catching. In sum, I have nothing against reductions, provided they are properly used, and for the appropriate purposes. But to assume, as Big Idea fans do, that such distillations can be ersatz texts, stand-ins for pericopes that can fully represent their thrusts (pericopal theologies), is a grave mistake.

Reduction after Comprehension

Yet Arthurs and St. John continue to trot out the dead horse to be whipped, as they confess they “do not understand why it [my distillation: Theological Focus] helps preachers to understand, experience, and curate authorial doings but obstructs listeners from the same.”³³ I hate to disappoint my respondents, but I never said those distillates “help preachers to *understand* [and] *experience*” authorial doings. Because I don’t believe reductions “help preachers to understand [and] experience” authorial doings. Instead, here’s what I argued in my article:

Did the sermon preparer need the Theological Focus to experience the theology of the text in the first place? Of course not—the reduction was created after the fact, concocted *after* the preacher caught what the text is *doing*. Following that discernment of the text’s theology (inexpressible in any format other than the text itself), it is subsequently reduced to the expressible—and lossy—format of the Theological Focus to serve as a label for that pericopal theology, a concise and easy reminder of the direction sermon preparation is to take.³⁴

You understood 1 Samuel 15 first (after I curated it for you). We caught its thrust; it hit us in the guts. *Now* we can create a reduction, *after* we have comprehended it. Thrust first; then reduction—there is no other way to do it. Unless you have understood the thrust/theology of that part of 1 Samuel 15, you can’t reduce it to a Theological Focus.³⁵

³¹ For this and other uses of Theological Foci, see Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 843–46. And for more on sermon mapping using the “theology split” maneuver, see Kuruvilla, *A Manual for Preaching*, 87–111.

³² Randal E. Pelton and Jeffrey D. Arthurs, “The Rewards and Challenges of Teaching Robinson’s Big Idea Method” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Homiletics Society Conference, Fort Worth, Texas, October 13–15, 2016), 75.

³³ “Response,” 3.

³⁴ “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 844 (emphases original).

³⁵ But Robinson thinks it works in the opposite direction: Without the Big Idea, he claimed, you haven’t understood the text: “I really don’t understand the Book of Romans unless I understand its subject and

So here's my \$1,000,000-question: If understanding of the text+thrust comes first and its reduction afterwards, why is it necessary to reduce the already understood text+thrust?³⁶ If we preachers can (and do) catch the thrust of the text *before* a reduction is concocted, then what we preachers must do, in turn, is curate the text for listeners so that they, too, catch the thrust exactly as we preachers did—*sans* reductions, distillations, Big Ideas, and Theological Foci. In other words, a reduction is redundant and unnecessary for the purpose Big Ideaists deploy it for. You don't need a reduction to "understand [and] experience" the text, as Arthurs and St. John think, and as they think I think, too.³⁷ No, I don't! Of course, as already noted, I affirm that every text has a single thrust (pericopal theology) but, equally strongly, I disagree that that thrust/theology can be expressed losslessly in a Big Idea reduction. Pericopal theology needs *all* the words of the text to be expressed! It is that blithe notion of reductive, lossless expressibility of the text+thrust/theology in the form of a Big Idea distillation (and the subsequent transfer of that distillate to listeners) that I'm against.³⁸

All that to say, Arthurs and St. John misunderstand reductions, what they are and how they should function. But there's more.

Systematic Theology

Another straw man is paraded out for torching by Arthurs and St. John:

Kuruville's antithesis [*sic*] toward distillation likewise seems to us to strike at the practice of systematic theology. ... If, as Kuruville 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," then no two passages of Scripture fundamentally address the same doctrine. ... By redefining theology to include the listener's experience of the non-

complement [= Big Idea]. By the way, you don't understand the Bible, unless you do that" ("Subject + Complement 770000," 1:13:00–1:13:05 [this archival video recording made at Dallas Seminary in the 1970s is in my possession]).

³⁶ Other than for sermon-*preparing* purposes, as I noted earlier. I also don't have anything against employing reductions as "occasional summaries of some sort within sermons, a necessary requirement of all oral-aural (mouth-to-ear) communication" (Kuruville, "Big Idea—*Requiescat in Pace!*" 10). In fact, I advocate such periodic précis (Kuruville, *A Manual for Preaching*, 130–36, 195–97). Once again, my discontent with the Big Idea is only this: that it can serve as a lossless distillate of the text (distilling the text) and that that distillate is what ought to be preached (preaching the distillate). I have no objection to other uses of distillation.

³⁷ And as Robinson himself thinks, as we saw. He once remarked on Psalm 117: "We do not understand the psalm until we can state its subject" (*Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* [3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014], 23). I disagree: "To contend that understanding does not happen, either for preacher or for listeners, unless one can hold in one's mind a Big Idea proposition with a subject and complement, is naïve at best, and perilous at worst" ("Time to Kill the Big Idea?" 836). See also Jean M. Mandler, "Thought before Language," *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* 8 (2004): 508–513; and Brian Butterworth, Robert Reeve, Fiona Reynolds, and Delyth Lloyd, "Numerical Thought With and Without Words," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 10 (2008): 13179–84. Plumbing the depths of neuroscience for the epistemology of texts (and of utterances, songs, and pictures) will surely yield valuable insights for homiletics.

³⁸ The consequence of that erroneous notion is the implicit deprecation of the value of the inspired text. And so, in the sermon, Big Ideaists use the text only to support the derivation of their Big Idea constructs: "Everything else in that passage should support those two findings [subject + complement; i.e., the Big Idea proposition], either indirectly or directly" (Haddon Robinson, "Unity, Order, Progress 77000," 24:50–25:10). The text has now been relegated to providing proofs for the creation of the Big Idea distillate—the preacher's masterpiece—evident in another of Robinson's assertions: "The way you get maximum benefit from the [Big] idea is to lay it down, explain it, prove it, apply it, and show people where it is in the biblical text" ("Better Big Ideas," 357 [emphasis added]).

discursive, affective qualities of the text, Kuruvilla precludes the possibility of theology as traditionally understood, and forbids the preacher its use in the pulpit.³⁹

This allegation, that betokens a further misunderstanding of reductions, has so many things wrong with it, I don’t know where to start. But I’ll try.

Systematic and biblical theology are reductive and distillatory—systematic and biblical, *not* pericopal.⁴⁰ And by virtue of such reduction we are not dealing with the specifics of the text. We are operating at some general and abstract level, which is why we get similar systematic/biblical theological ideas from different texts. For instance, if we see in Jesus’s feeding of the thousands in Mark 6 and Mark 8 only the systematic theology doctrine of divine omnipotence (Jesus’ power over matter), both those pericopes will appear to be teaching the same thing (likewise in Mark 8 and 10, both of which will then demonstrate the identical omnipotence of Jesus exercised in his healing of the blind). That concordance happens simply because such *systematic* theology bits and bytes operate at an abstract level far removed from the specificities of the text. When you go up the abstraction ladder many things are going to look alike. Such similarity between discrete texts is itself proof that these systematic theology interpretations do not isolate what is specific for the texts in question. In fact, Mark 6 and 8, in terms of *pericopal* theology, have two very different thrusts, the first dealing with a leadership issue, and the second with Jesus’ provision for disciples’ daily needs.⁴¹ In sum, yes, systematic and biblical theology will find multiple pericopes dealing with identical ideas by virtue of their generic and abstract transactions. And, no, pericopal theology will *not* find multiple, verbally and contextually distinct pericopes dealing with similar thrusts.⁴²

Besides, systematic theology pays no attention to authorial *doing*/textual thrusts; rather, it focuses on entailments of the text. Consider Matthew 28:19–20 example, where the Trinity is mentioned. This text entails that there be at least three Persons in the Godhead; likewise, 2 Corinthians 13:14. So these two texts share an identical systematic theology entailment. That is how most systematic theology factoids are garnered—from textual entailments. But surely Trinitarianism is not the thrust of the particular pericopes containing those verses. Please note: I am questioning neither the veracity of such deductions from entailments or the utility thereof for the body of Christ⁴³; I am only asserting that expressible systematic theology (dealing with

³⁹ Arthurs and St. John, “Response,” 5. I’ll deal with “experience” below.

⁴⁰ This distinction, in itself, counters my respondents’ claim that I am “redefining theology.” No, I am not. I am propounding a *new species* thereof, related to the pericope: pericopal theology. And it takes all of the text (its semantics and its pragmatics) to experience that genus of theology; the text is, therefore, inalterable into any other form without negatively affecting its thrust/pericopal theology. See Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching*, 91–109, especially 98–99 for the distinctions between these various theologies.

⁴¹ See Abraham Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 129–41, 155–68.

⁴² I’d even argue that even texts that are verbally identical (for instance 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18) have differing thrusts because of their dissimilar contexts—where they are placed in the canon and in light of their surrounding co-texts.

⁴³ Systematizing is a necessary constructive endeavor in the life of the church, but I strongly urge that preachers not use their pulpits on Sunday morning to preach *systematic* theology topical sermons; by doing so, the specifics of a text’s thrust—its *pericopal* theology—gets neglected, to the detriment of the spiritual growth of the people of God. Walter C. Kaiser advises his students “to preach a topical sermon only once every five years—and then immediately to repent and ask God’s forgiveness” (*Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 19). My sentiments exactly!

entailments) cannot and should not be confused with inexpressible pericopal theology (dealing with authorial *doings*/textual thrusts).⁴⁴

Thus, my respondents, misunderstanding reductions, now seem to be mixing categories, confusing their systematic theology undertakings with my pericopal theology transactions. The whole notion of reductions and their proper use (and the distinctions between systematic/biblical and pericopal theology) seem to be lost on Arthurs and St. John.

Misunderstanding of Curation

So what is a preacher to do instead, avoiding these serious misunderstandings of pragmatics, of language, and of reductions? I suggested that preachers curate the text+thrust for their listeners. But Arthurs and St. John apparently did not comprehend my proposal. And that leads us to their fourth misunderstanding—of what I mean by “curation.”

Sermon's Power and Pathos?

Against my critique of their use of the Big Idea, Arthurs and St. John push back: “Having a Big Idea does not *necessarily* gut the sermon of power and pathos.”⁴⁵ Wait, what? The *sermon's* power and pathos? I never said anything about a *sermon's* power and pathos in my article. I've constantly been harping on one instrument, playing a single chord: the *text's* power and pathos (and everything else that is in the text). These are two entirely different things: the “power and pathos” of a *text* (the focus of my article) and the “power and pathos” of a *sermon* (to which my respondents refer, but with which I did not deal at all). No doubt, the *sermon's* power and pathos are essential and necessary elements in homiletics, as classical rhetoricians are wont to insist in their recommendations to orators.⁴⁶ But the issue of my essay was the *text's* power and pathos. Arthurs and St. John seem unaware of this distinction, and so they misunderstand curation.

What I'd like to see preachers do in sermons is curate the *text's* power and pathos and meaning and everything else that's in the text, so that listeners catch the thrust of the text, the theology of the pericope. This curation is not a duplication or a recreation of the text's power and pathos in a sermon's power and pathos. Curation is not a Xerox-ing act, as Arthurs and St. John assume: “a preacher curates the text, *recreating* its power and pathos.”⁴⁷ Nope! Curation is

⁴⁴ “Inexpressible,” by which I mean, of course, “inexpressible *without loss*.” If the pericopal theology is reduced to a Theological Focus, that distillate is extremely lossy, and can never be a substitute for the text though, as we've seen, such a reduction has other uses.

⁴⁵ “Response,” 2 (emphasis original).

⁴⁶ Classical rhetoric was mostly about speakers creating masterpieces of eloquence, whether forensic (in courts), deliberative (in legislatures), or epideictic (at funerals). Needless to say, I do not dismiss the value of this discipline for homiletics, despite the allegation of Arthurs and St. John (“Response,” 5–6). In fact, in my most recent work, *A Manual for Preaching*, I unashamedly cite Cicero and Quintilian and a host of ancient and modern theorists and proponents of rhetoric, whose notions are crucial for the preaching endeavor. But I do assert that classical rhetoricians knew nothing about the exposition of a text, which is what a sermon is/does. And so I warn preachers to watch out for that limitation before importing classical rhetoric wholesale into homiletics, as has been done by instructors of preaching who have advanced degrees in that field (see Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 837–38).

⁴⁷ Arthurs and St. John, “Response,” 5 (emphasis added). They also declare that “Kuruvilla suggests that interpreters articulate a ‘world in front of the text’” (“Response,” 3). You will be hard pressed to find any suggestion of the sort in my writings. The *world in front of the text*, a synonym for pericopal theology, cannot be articulated or expressed; it can only be pointed to, portrayed, demonstrated (that is to say, curated). This world/theology is, I have already claimed, inexpressible in any other form than the text itself—it needs all the words of the text to be manifest. And as a preacher, I can only facilitate my listeners catching it—by curation.

neither duplication nor recreation. If I am a docent at the Louvre, I do not curate the *Mona Lisa* by “recreating” the venerable portrait with my non-existent artistic resources. No, I’d curate the masterwork by da Vinci by pointing out critical elements of the work, including the absence of the good lady’s eyebrows.⁴⁸ My stick-figure rendition of the *Mona Lisa* is not what gallery visitors are there to experience. Likewise, preachers are to curate the ineffable text of Scripture by pointing out the textual clues to what the author is *doing*, explaining what needs to be explained, demonstrating structural keys to textual emphases, and so on. In short, the sermonic curation of the text is a facilitation of the audience’s apprehension of the pericopal theology, an enabling of their catching the experience of the text as its author intended.⁴⁹ And replicating or recreating the *text’s* power and pathos (or anything else in the text) in the *sermon’s* power and pathos (as if one could!) is not the way of curation.⁵⁰ Preachers are not called to create their own masterpiece; preachers are called to curate the Master’s piece. Arthurs and St. John have not understood the difference between traditional preaching (masterpiece creation) and the kind of preaching I propose (Master’s piece curation).

“Relevantizing”

Arthurs and St. John also come up with another strange, but related, objection: “Kuruville insists that the text is ‘irreducible into any other form,’ yet he dramatically changes the text’s form when moving from text to sermon,” noting that I impose no constraint on a preacher to follow the textual sequence within a sermon.⁵¹ I am “chang[ing] the text’s form” in a sermon as I curate it? Why, what did Arthurs and St. John think I was doing—recreating, reduplicating, Xerox-ing the text and its form and its sequence in my sermon? That certainly is *not* curation. Do I have to move in some particular sequence in my curation, so as not to “change the text’s form”? And as a museum curator, do I have to start with the *Mona Lisa’s* vague background (icy mountains? winding paths? indistinct bridge?), then move to the lady’s pose, the folding of her arms, then address her clothing, ...? And what if I upended that sequence? And threw in a comment about her lack of eyebrows somewhere in the middle? Again, Arthurs and St. John betray their incomprehension of curation. In curation, I’m pointing out the textual clues, in whatever form or order or sequence I deem expedient, for this purpose: that my listeners may be aided in their experience of the thrust of the text as they encounter the text.⁵² There is no constraint that I curate the text in some particular form or order: I’m curating, not duplicating or recreating the text.⁵³

⁴⁸ I have no clue why she lacks those appendages; I have no idea what da Vinci was *doing* with that omission!

⁴⁹ As I “kinda sorta” curated 1 Samuel 15, earlier.

⁵⁰ The subtitle of one of Arthurs’ books gives away his game: *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres*. If I, a Louvre curator, raise an arm and point to the *Mona Lisa*, “Look, she doesn’t have eyebrows,” have I *recreated* the *Mona Lisa’s* pathos? Have I duplicated its thrust? Not by a long shot. But Arthurs thinks (and likely St. John, as well) that the role of the sermon is to *recreate* the power and pathos of the biblical text (including the dynamics of its genres). I don’t know what that is, but curation it definitely is not.

⁵¹ Arthurs and St. John, “Response,” 6.

⁵² Similarly, do I have to preach in story form to curate a narrative, or recite a poem to curate the Psalms, so as to retain the form of the text in my sermon?

⁵³ That being said, I am somewhat partial to curating the text in the sequence determined by the pericope, simply to make it easier for listeners to follow along as they read the text with me, without having to make ungainly leaps between non-contiguous verses. But the fact remains that only those who think their sermons are “*recreating* the dynamics” of biblical texts (Big Ideaists) will be artificially constrained to follow the text’s sequence as written,

And so we have again: “[Kuruvilla] 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.”⁵⁴ It is patently clear that my respondents do not grasp what curation is all about. Bear in mind that though curation is the primary role of the one interposed between the word of God for the people of God (i.e., the preacher), a sermon has other things going on in it. There is also the secondary role of the preacher, what I’m labeling “relevantizing,” that involves everything the preacher does to connect with the audience, including introductions and conclusions, moves to relevance, illustrations, and of course, application—everything that makes the text+theology relevant to listeners.⁵⁵ Of course this “relevantizing” will certainly take longer to accomplish than a simple reading of the text.

But what if the curation itself (without any “relevantizing”) takes longer than it takes to read the text? Does that mean I’ve “altered the text” in my sermon as Arthurs and St. John accuse? As an example, imagine my “preaching” this uninspired text:

A wealthy Texas oil man asked his family what they wanted for Christmas. His wife wanted “something early American” so he bought her Philadelphia. His son wanted “a chemistry set” so he bought him DuPont. His little daughter wanted “a Mickey Mouse outfit” so he bought her Texas A&M University.⁵⁶

Imagine also that in my audience are several non-Southern Americans, unfamiliar with that Texas staple, the “Aggie Joke.” Also in attendance, imagine, are a number of internationals who, in addition, do not understand “early American” and may be unfamiliar with DuPont de Nemours, Inc., the multinational chemical company. Of course, “Mickey Mouse outfit” and its connotations are likely to be lost on them, as well as its application to that fine institution of higher learning in College Station, TX. So how do I curate that piece of persiflage, since many of my listeners seem unable to catch the thrust of my “preaching” text? Obviously, my curation will have nothing to do with duplicating the joke or recreating it. Instead, I will need to point out, explain, and draw attention to the various emphases of the joke: the significance of its referents, the nuances of its idioms, the background of its genre, the outlandish suggestions of its ambiguities and polysemy, and so on. All of which activities will, no doubt, take me longer than it takes to read that fifty-word Southern classic. Have I thus, by my curation, “altered the text”? I can tell that Arthurs and St. John misunderstand curation as I employ it. So here I go again: Curation is simply the process of facilitating listeners/readers’ catching the thrust/pericopal theology of the text, as the author intended for them to experience (on “experience,” see below).⁵⁷ It may take longer than the reading of the text, or it may not. It may follow the form and sequence of the text, or it may not. Those issues are beside the point. The question is: Have I curated the text for my listeners, so that they are better placed to experience the text as the author intended for them to do?

so as not the “change the text’s form.” No such constraint exists for preachers curating the Master’s piece—they are not (re)creating a masterpiece.

⁵⁴ Arthurs and St. John, “Response,” 7.

⁵⁵ This secondary role of “relevantizing” I do not touch upon at all in my article. In fact, I affirmed I wasn’t doing so at least six times in my essay (“Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 825n3, 836n72, 842, 843n103, 844, 845).

⁵⁶ A version of this set piece is found in Timothy S. Warren, “The Proposition,” in *PM103 Expository Preaching Class Notes* (Dallas Seminary, 2019), 7.

⁵⁷ This makes sermonic curation akin to footnoting an article. Footnotes are not recreating or duplicating the text of the article, but are only providing necessary glosses to it, so that readers may “experience” the article as its writer intended.

Misunderstanding of "Experience"

Since Arthurs and St. John do not comprehend the value of curation, they also misconstrue the goal of that activity, manifesting, fifthly, a misunderstanding of what I label the "experience of the text."

Several times in their response, my respondents describe what I'm claiming by "experience of the text" with phrases like this: "affective experience"; "the listener's experience of the author's 'doings'"; "listener 'experience'"; "the listener's 'intangible experiences'"; etc.⁵⁸ All of this gives the distinct impression, if you haven't read my essay, that what I was talking about by "experience" was something loosey-goosey, touchy-feely, affective and subjective, nothing more than a quiver in the liver or a lizard in the gizzard. Far from it!

I have consistently asserted that a text (indeed, any utterance) has its saying and its *doing*, its semantics and its pragmatics. Thus, a text is both discursive (in its semantics) and non-discursive (in its pragmatics). The former requires the *science* of language for its interpretation; the latter, the *art* of language for its. "Hermeneutics for homiletics involves more than just decoding the semantics of a text to decipher and comprehend its saying (science). Additionally, it involves discerning the pragmatics of a text to infer and experience its doing/theology (art)."⁵⁹

So what is this experience? It is entirely author intended. It is how the author wanted us to receive the text, how the text was intended to hit us, how we should understand it, how it should affect us—the *experience* of the text in all its fullness—semantics *and* pragmatics, art and science.⁶⁰ It is how everything the text is should be experienced by us *as intended by the author*. It is exclusively sourced in the author's intent and discerned from the text. And I said as much in my article: "The theology of a text is the thrust/force of the text-as-a-whole: how the text is A/authorially intended to be experienced."⁶¹ This is akin to the experience painters would want their viewers to have, musicians their listeners, and poets their readers. Such an experience of the text+theology, an experience that is cognitive and emotional and volitional, involves catching both the semantics (word and sentence meanings) and the pragmatics (the event meaning—what the A/author is *doing* in the event of communication). The best word I could find that encompasses everything the text is A/authorially intended to convey is "experience"—the experience that the A/author intended for readers to have when the text is encountered. That term is all the more appropriate because authors are *doing* things *to us* with their texts—

⁵⁸ Arthurs and St. John, "Response," 3, 4, 7, 8.

⁵⁹ Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea?" 840. Arthurs and St. John also allege that "in [Kuruvilla's] zeal to point out the artistic qualities of texts, *the pendulum has swung too far*" ("Response," 4 [emphasis added]). That may well be true. But I'm disappointed that Arthurs and St. John deny me the benefit of the doubt that they granted Robinson, excusing him for being a pendulum-swinging child of his times: "Robinson developed his homiletic in the 1960s and 70s, and he faced his own battalion. ... Robinson may have *swung the pendulum too far* ... , but Robinson's work should be understood in its context" ("Response," 2 [emphasis added]). Well, I too am a child of my times and, in light of the abject hermeneutical deficiency in current homiletics, I push harder in the opposite direction, just so I may be heard, especially considering that I am combatting the formidable "exegetical industrial complex" and the unyielding military propositional enterprise. (The former term was coined by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theological Commentary and 'The Voice from Heaven': Exegesis, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Interpretation," in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* [TENT 8; eds. Stanley E. Porter and Eckhard J. Schnabel; Leiden: Brill, 2013], 273.)

⁶⁰ It is not just "experiences produced in the reader by these non-discursive elements [pragmatics] of the text" (Arthurs and St. John, "Response," 7). No, the experience of the text includes *both* semantics *and* pragmatics.

⁶¹ "Time to Kill the Big Idea?" 839n86.

and those *doings* they want us to *experience*. So, “preachers are not simply to major in the science of semantics, but must graduate in the art of pragmatics, discerning authorial doings and the theology of the pericope so as to experience the text as intended.”⁶² And they are to curate the text so as to facilitate that same authorially intended experience being caught by listeners—everything the author intended, every way the author intended. It is authorial and textual from beginning to end.

But alas, Arthurs and St. John fail to get it, and thus they display their misunderstanding of what texts are intended for by their authors—to be experienced!

Preach a Sermon? Read a Text?

But Arthurs and St. John make a fair extrapolation of my affirmation regarding experience: “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.”⁶³ To that I say, “Amen, amen, and amen!” Ideally, yes, reading is all that is required, reading is all that needs to be done. After all, Scripture is the word of God for the people of God, given to them—why? [Wait for it now ...] Why? Given to them by God ... *to be read!* Since that is the case, why should preachers be interposed between the written word of God directed to the reading people of God? The reason for the preacher’s interposition between these two entities is so that that mediator can help people catch the authorial *doing* (the pragmatics) of the text, and thereby facilitate readers experiencing the text as authorially intended. Now, I wish readers could appreciate the wordplays on “voice” in 1 Samuel 15 and experience the text just by reading it, without anyone having to point these things out for them.⁶⁴ Unfortunately people cannot catch and experience the text’s thrust and theology,⁶⁵ so the preacher is interjected between the word of God and the people of God to footnote the text, to gloss the text, to play midwife to the text, i.e., to curate the word of God for the people of God, explaining, and pointing out, and emphasizing, and doing whatever needs to be done, so that listeners may, as they encounter the text, experience what the A/author of the word of God wanted the people of God to experience.⁶⁶

And so, we hope and wait for the day when the people of God will not need a preacher to come between them and the word of God written to them. Indeed, the New Covenant has God promising exactly that: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes,

⁶² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 841. But please note: While one can determine semantics without discerning pragmatics, one cannot discern pragmatics without determining semantics. In other words, to catch the pragmatics of the text, one must have grasped its semantics. The former is built upon, *and includes*, the latter.

⁶³ “Response,” 7.

⁶⁴ I also wish all my listeners could catch the intricacies and ironies of that uninspired Aggie Joke without any need for intermediary curation.

⁶⁵ The reasons for this inability are many and varied, among which are: unfamiliarity with the original languages; failures of translations; the assumption that Scripture is only a handbook of information from which to mine out nuggets of systematic theology; nonrecognition of authorial *doings* and pragmatics; unacquaintance with proper reading methods; and so on. In my opinion, most of the blame for these breakdowns must be placed squarely on the shoulders of Bible scholars, translators, and preachers. See Abraham Kuruvilla, “What is the Author *Doing* with What He is Saying? Pragmatics and Preaching—An Appeal,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 60 (2017): 557–80 (this essay, along with a colleague’s response and my own subsequent rejoinder, is available at <http://homiletix.com/kuruvillajets2017/>).

⁶⁶ So, yes, the sermon is but a form of glossing the text (in the preacher’s primary role; there is also a secondary role, that of making the text+theology relevant to the audience, with illustrations, with links to contemporary life, and by deriving appropriate, specific application for that particular local body of Christ: “relevanzizing”).

and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (Ezek 36:27). May that day come and soon, putting Arthurs and St. John and me and the rest of us preachers out of jobs!

Sadly, despite all my writings, and despite their possession of at least one of my commentaries, my respondents' minds are rife with confusion. All they see is the preacher, as a "skillful communicator," rewriting (reducing) the word of God, propositionalizing the divinely inspired text into a humanly contrived Big Idea that functionally renders Scripture effete, superfluous, and unnecessary. A profound misunderstanding, indeed!

Misunderstanding of "Borrowing"

And sixthly and finally, there is a misunderstanding of "borrowing." This is not directly linked to their other misunderstandings of pragmatics, of language, of reductions, of curation, and of experience: their last misstep evinces their flawed opinions regarding two kinds of "borrowing."

New Testament Borrowing from the Old

Arthurs and St. John commit a common hermeneutical mistake, misunderstanding the borrowing of the Old Testament by the New. Since I've already consumed far too much space in this rejoinder, I won't address their discussion of the use of Psalm 110:1 in Acts 2,⁶⁷ except to raise a series of questions, answers to most of which I've provided elsewhere (please see the references):

- 1) Was that a complete sermon of Peter given to us by Luke in Acts 2? Or was it Luke's (inspired) *edition* of Peter's sermon? Can we really analyze *as a sermon* a text that we suspect might only be an incomplete sermon, the original preached version being redacted for the current writer's specific and different, albeit inspired, purpose?
- 2) So, isn't what Luke was *doing* with what he was saying with his (inspired) edition of Peter's sermon what readers and interpreters should be attending to? Wasn't it Luke's words (and his thrust/pericopal theology) that alone were inspired, sermon redactions and all, rather than the words of Peter? That is to say, isn't it more valid to seek the *author's* intent/thrust, rather than that of a character in the narrative?⁶⁸
- 3) Was Peter's use of Psalm 110 focusing on an entailment of the text, or was he performing a literary-grammatical-historical exegesis and exposition of the psalm? Or was it a form of Jewish midrash? In any case, should we be using the apostles' hermeneutic, whatever it might be, in our own interpretation of Scripture?⁶⁹
- 4) Besides, wasn't Peter deploying Psalm 110 apologetically, as part of an evangelistic proclamation, which, at least for me, is not the same as an edifying sermon?⁷⁰

⁶⁷ "Response," 7–8.

⁶⁸ See Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!* 101–110.

⁶⁹ See Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!* 246–47.

⁷⁰ See Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching*, 53–54. My respondents answer this question themselves: "[Peter's] purpose was to proclaim salvation" (Arthurs and St. John, "Response," 8). There you go: Even if we have a complete transcript of Peter's sermon (which I doubt), even if Luke's thrust of his text of Acts 2 is identical to the postulated Petrine thrust in his, Peter's, sermon (which also I doubt), even if Peter was performing a literary/historical/grammatical exegesis and exposition of Psalm 110 (which I most certainly doubt), it was an evangelistic proclamation, quite a different bowl of wax from an edifying sermon.

In this regard, permit me to add two extended excerpts from my own writings and let them speak for themselves:

[Here] is a critical observation, often missed by those examining quotes of the OT in the NT. Not every NT citation or allusion or oblique reference to the OT is an *exposition* of the older text that adheres to literary, historical, and grammatical constraints. Rather, they are often imaginative applications and creative reemployments of a pithy phrase—a hijacking, if you will, of a recognizable commonplace, slogan, or bromide: an intertextual pun. . . . Recently, criticizing the trend in academia to weigh, measure, and count everything that is weighable, measurable, and countable, I recommended to a fellow committee member at my institution that our committee motto ought to be *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*. Yes, I wanted the biblical reference recognized. Yes, I wanted the literal meaning of the arcane terms understood. But I also wanted it known that I was trying to be creative and clever, while at the same time poking fun at (and condemning) our inclination towards the idolatry of numbers that makes academics (or is it administrators?) devotees of metrology. In other words, I was making an *intertextual pun!* My intention was hardly congruent with that of the venerable prophet: my “hijacking” of Daniel’s Aramaic report of what was inscribed on the Belshazzar’s wall was not intended to be an exposition of Dan 5:25–28. While there were connections between my utterance and Daniel’s—connections actually meant to be recognized—there was no intention to pass off my wisecrack as a literary-historical-grammatical gem of interpretation. One must bear in mind that OT-in-the-NT is not a monolithic transaction. There is clearly a vast diversity of purposes in the use of OT texts in the New: illustrations and analogies and intertextual puns, in addition to prophetic, typological, and allegorical usages. Rather than seeking the *hermeneutical* bases of these NT uses of OT texts, I suggest that one must seek the *rhetorical* bases of their uses. What was the NT author trying to do in/with the writing of *his* text—OT quotes and all? At least for preaching purposes, the interpreter must privilege the text itself, not the hermeneutical method the author employed to bring the text into being.⁷¹

Elsewhere, in the same vein, I pointed out this perilous blind spot in biblical studies.

The New Testament’s use of the Old Testament is *not* the definitive interpretation or decisive meaning of those earlier writings. Prior texts are often imaginatively applied, obliquely referred to, and creatively redeployed in the newer productions—as intertextual puns, allusions and illustrations, or prophetic applications—to serve these later appropriating authors’ inspired purposes and agendas. No doubt there are formal applicational interpretations of the Old Testament in the New Testament (1 Tim 5:17–18 comes to mind). But the majority of New Testament citations of the Old Testament are *not* literary, historical, grammatical, and rhetorical expositions of the prior texts. So, when those inspired New Testament passages with their Old Testament borrowings are preached, one should handle such infallible and inerrant New Testament texts (including their Old Testament quotes) *as their New Testament authors intended*—that is, what these authors were *doing*, with puns, allusions, illustrations, applications, and all. And, likewise, when inspired Old Testament sources are preached, one should address those infallible and inerrant Old Testament texts *as their Old Testament authors intended*—that is, what those writers were *doing*.⁷²

⁷¹ Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!* 221, 221n27.

⁷² Abraham Kuruvilla, “Response to Bryan Chapell,” in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today* (eds. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 32. Also see my contribution in the same volume, “Christiconic View,” 43–70.

Borrowing from “Odd Bedfellows”

The second kind of borrowing I want to touch on (briefly), is my borrowing ideas from certain scholars who are eyed with suspicion by Arthurs and St. John. And so you have this risible objection from Arthurs and St. John: “[Kuruvilla is forced] 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.”⁷³ Quite unbecoming of scholarship, this kind of wholesale disparagement of ideas for *ad hominem* reasons (falling prey to the genetic fallacy) certainly will not do in academia. Hey, Paul cited the words of Epimenides of Crete, a 6th-century B.C.E. pagan who believed in Zeus.⁷⁴ Arthurs and St. John would probably be skeptical of the good apostle’s theology proper, because he dared to lodge with that “odd hermeneutical bedfellow!”

Don’t miss the irony that Arthurs and St. John cite literary theorist Kenneth Burke in their response!⁷⁵ That scholar was an avowed agnostic, influenced by Marx and Freud, and an alcoholic to boot (not to mention one who implemented some questionable marital arrangements for himself)! Oh, Arthurs and St. John, whom are you bedding with? And what’s more, in his doctoral dissertation, Arthurs shares some of my own “odd hermeneutical bedfellows”: Thomas Long, Wayne Booth, and Eugene Lowry. It goes further: Paul Ricoeur and Fred Craddock and a bunch of those same neoorthodox liberals that Arthurs and his coauthor accused me of cohabiting with turn up—surprise, surprise!—in Arthurs’ own work, *Preaching with Variety*.⁷⁶ Yup, we’re all in bed together, Arthurs and me and all these folks, in what can only be called—pardon my French!—a *ménage à trois*.

Conclusion

In a *coup de grâce*, Arthurs and St. John take issue with my statement that “with the blossoming of language philosophy in the late twentieth century, our understanding of how language works has grown considerably.”⁷⁷ My respondents disagree: “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.”⁷⁸ With that, they imply that “our understanding of how language works” has remained stagnant for centuries, and worse, that I’ve chased after theories not concordant with the word of God. Granted “pericopal theology” is not in Scripture, but neither is “systematic [or biblical] theology,” “Trinity,” “discipleship,” or “inerrancy.” Surely Arthurs and St. John are not suggesting that unless a theory is explicitly found and named in the Bible it is unscriptural? In that case, we’d even have to give up on the law of gravity—it doesn’t exist, because the Bible doesn’t mention it. It is just one of the many “theories [of physics] that have grown considerably.” Or William Harvey’s 17th-century theory of blood circulation—another one of the theories that have “grown considerably,” and has contributed nothing to our understanding

⁷³ “Response,” 4.

⁷⁴ See Titus 1:12.

⁷⁵ “Response,” 6. Arthurs has even made presentations at the Kenneth Burke Society meetings.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey D. Arthurs, “Biblical Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism: Augmenting the Grammatical/Historical Approach” (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 1992), 208–214; Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 226, 234.

⁷⁷ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea?” 838.

⁷⁸ Arthurs and St. John, “Response,” 8 (emphasis original).

of cardiovascular physiology. And I suppose, by that same token, we must discard the rules of grammar, too, since the Bible doesn't say anything about them. And do Arthurs and St. John really think Philemon talks about "propositions"? Or Chronicles about classical rhetoric? And Habakkuk about the "Big Idea"? So, singing in the same key as my respondents, I can only incant: "Away with all things unmentioned in Scripture: a pox on propositions; fie upon classical rhetoric; and may the Big Idea be killed" (though this last hex is, IMHO, a good thing).⁷⁹

Whatever they may be, propounded ideas must be critically addressed and evaluated on their own merits.⁸⁰ Most of Arthurs' and St. John's exertions in this regard have been inutile and futile, built on misconceptions and misunderstandings, bolstered with straw men and false premises. And they have cast aspersions on reputable scholars from whom all of us ought to be learning, even if we don't march in lockstep with them. I'd challenge Arthurs and St. John to come up with anything I've put forth that violates any known systematic or biblical theology truth.⁸¹

And with that, my litany of Arthurs' and St. John's cataract of misunderstandings comes to an end. The defenses of Big Ideaism fail to convince, especially with the fatal errors manifest in that philosophy. The time has come, therefore, not to talk of many things, but to let the Big Idea beast, currently *in extremis* in the ICU, go to its everlasting rest—it is flatlining anyway. So here's a bit of medical advice from the doctor in the house: "Do *not* resuscitate!"⁸²

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways."

The Passing of Arthur
Alfred, Lord Tennyson



⁷⁹ Indeed, Arthurs' résumé lists rhetorical theory and criticism, speech performance, and literature and literary criticism among his areas of expertise—all theories that have no explicit representation in Scripture and that have "grown considerably"! (See <https://gordonconwell.edu/faculty/current/jeffrey-arthurs/>; accessed November 1, 2019.) Hmm ... I may have to consider complaining about Arthurs' unbiblical qualifications to Gordon-Conwell Seminary's Dean. Oh, wait—Jeff Arthurs *is* the Dean!

⁸⁰ One must be open to new understandings as long as these ideas are not inconsistent with Scripture, and are consistent with experience, as I firmly believe about the aspects of language philosophy I have drawn from (which, in any case, aren't *de novo* theories, but only phenomenological best explanations of what regularly happens in normal communication, spoken or scripted, secular or sacred).

⁸¹ If Arthurs really thinks, as he and his compatriot assert, that my work "uncritically ... accepted theories of language that simply do not agree with the word of God" (Arthurs and St. John, "Response," 8), he must be having second thoughts about employing my commentary on Mark as a resource for preaching in his church (Arthurs and St. John, "Response," 2n8). (However, I hope it is too late for him to return it to Amazon and claim a refund; I don't want to lose the couple of pennies his purchase has added to my retirement fund.)

⁸² And to those who are willing to let it go, agreeing with me that homileticians cannot just 1) distill the text and 2) preach the distillate, I say: "Let's go conquer the world, edifying God's people, extending God's kingdom, and exalting God's name!"