

Making New Speech from Old: How Some New Methods in Biblical Studies Might Help the Preacher

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Preaching is like fine cooking. To do it well, the cook needs good, fresh ingredients, the proper pots, pans, and knives, and the skills of timing, blending, and organizing. Finally, he needs artistry and discretion to create meals suited to the occasion and to present them with creativity and originality. When everything clicks, the result is a magical alchemy that restores the body and nourishes the spirit.¹ Effective preaching is as complex, demanding, and artistic.

There are, of course, as many ways to organize and blend a sermon as there are to prepare an Irish stew or a French bouillabaisse.² Sermons can be topical, developing theological themes such as the providence of God, or they can focus on liturgical season, or Christian behavior. They can use words or phrases or even short verses from the text as a starting point for reflection, but they will not make me happy unless they describe, expose, and retell the text for the community before them, on this day, in this concrete set of circumstances. This is no small order, and as a Roman Catholic woman, and thus not ordained, I speak more from observation than from practice. I speak as a pew sitter with a particular vantage point and a deep hunger for the word of God. Tell me about the text. Make the text live. Reveal it to be a living word that drops down like dew from the heavens.

But how? Emerging methods in biblical studies have particular relevance for the art of preaching. Those of us educated primarily in historical-critical studies learned to take the text apart, to analyze historical layers and small literary units that make up a passage. We learned about the process of composition of a text and how to go behind it to the historical situation thought to have produced it. But rarely did we get assistance in putting the text back together or making it vital for our own world. This may explain why some preachers are content to lift out a few words or verses from a larger passage for the creation of a sermon. Some of the new approaches in biblical studies set out to remedy this division of biblical texts into smaller and smaller units by concentrating on the final form of the text as a literary whole.

To discuss contributions that newer methods of biblical studies might make to preaching, I describe benefits that may derive from intertextual criticism, rhetorical criticism, and feminist biblical hermeneutics. I begin with intertextual criticism because I believe that intertextuality actually describes the preaching process itself.

Intertextual criticism studies how the Bible reuses old texts to create new ones for changed circumstances within the community. Intertextual criticism emerges from earlier traditions-criticism of Martin Noth that investigated how a particular theological theme was reused by later texts. For example, Delbert Hillers studied how the theme of covenant changed and expanded from the pentateuch through the prophets and into the New Testament.³ Intertextual criticism is more precise and more literary than traditions criticism. Its importance for preaching is less its attention to the relationship of one biblical book to another as it is to the ways old texts use new ones. These reuses of texts may help preachers in creating their sermons.

As practiced by Michael Fishbane, for example, intertextuality demonstrates that later biblical texts quote, cite, allude to, contradict, or modify earlier biblical texts.⁴ Fishbane shows that this process of revisiting and reshaping former texts was at the heart of the emergence of the Hebrew scriptures. The biblical books developed as midrash upon earlier texts.

In her recently completed dissertation, Patricia Tull Willey has used this approach to study Isa. 40-55.⁵ She describes how Second Isaiah eloquently alludes to, quotes, responds to, contradicts, and reinterprets texts from Exodus, Genesis, Lamentations, and numerous other Old Testament books to construct a vision of hope for the community in Babylonian exile. Willey points out, for instance, that Second Isaiah challenges, perhaps even reverses, Genesis creation accounts.⁶ Gen. 1:2 says that when God created the world, it was *tohu webohu*, a “waste and void.” Second Isaiah says, instead, that God did not create chaos, *tohu*. Gen. 1:26-27 asserts that God created humankind in the divine image, but Second Isaiah asks, “To whom will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?” (Isa. 40:18), implying that there is no divine likeness to be found. Finally, Gen. 2:2-3 tells us that God rested on the sabbath, but Second Isaiah claims that the Creator “does not faint or grow weary” (Isa. 40:28).

It is partly the reuse of old texts in new ways that gives Second Isaiah such extraordinary persuasive power. Willey explicitly builds her work on studies of linguistic theorist Michel Bakhtin who observes that we cannot speak without using the words of others.⁷ All speech emerges from preexisting speech. Speech is dialogical. It arises, not out of thin air nor from our own isolated lives, but from the community of speech in which we live, from old stories and texts that live there and that we retell, retrope, recompose.

What is important for the preacher in this new approach to biblical studies is this very process of biblical reinterpretation, of intertextual dialogue, in which the preacher engages. Biblical texts arise in concrete crises, struggles, and turning points within the believing community’s history to which a writer or group of writers/speakers respond. Second Isaiah was addressing a community of exiles whose entire theological and physical world had collapsed and who desperately needed new visions to empower them to face the future. They wondered if the God of their ancestors had abandoned them or was simply powerless in the face of the deities of other nations. Second Isaiah faces the crisis head on. He does not evade or ignore the problems facing them, nor does he merely repeat old texts that may have grown stale and lifeless in a foreign land. He grabs hold of them, disagrees with them, and reinterprets them in face of the despair and fear in his community. He uses the old language to create lyrical, bracing new speech.

Second Isaiah’s new speech could make the community stand on tiptoes of expectant hope. The God of Israel is not sleeping, not resting, never wearies. That means the God of their ancestors has the alertness and enduring power to rescue them from exile. Their God is no mere human with limited and measurable power. Their God is beyond comparison with any being, human or divine. Indeed, elsewhere in the same chapter, Second Isaiah will describe the Creator as a powerful giant “who measures the waters in the hollow of his hand” and for whom the nations are a mere “drop from a bucket” (Isa. 40:12, 15).

Rhetorical criticism⁸ can help explain why the process of textual revision or the writing of sermons as “intertexts” can be such a persuasive event for the believing

community. Rhetorical criticism studies the literary shaping, poetic and narrative devices, and linguistic brilliance of a text to uncover its persuasive intentions. All biblical texts seek to persuade their audience to think or act in particular ways. So do sermons. For a text or sermon to be persuasive it must draw upon cherished beliefs of its audience. It must use key symbols, metaphors, and narratives of that audience as a means to capture their hearts and minds. Then it must dialogue with the original text, recasting it to create a response to the current moment in the contemporary community. This is another way of saying what every parent or teacher realizes. One has to start with what the child or adult already knows and build upon it, dialogue with it, to move the individual to new knowledge.

Creating a sermon as an explicit intertext with the biblical passage(s) of the worship service means to use the language, images, metaphors, and narrative lines of the text to create a new experience for the audience. Sermons have immense potency and allusive capacities when they use the biblical text closely, when they attend to its literary or narrative structure and reuse some of its language in a new situation. Merely repeating the text as is will not do. A new version of the story or poem is needed. This process makes the old text sing. The preacher creates a new text, a noncanonical version, out of the old one by quoting, alluding to, and recasting the original.

Another example from the prophets can further illustrate the process of intertextual composition and also exemplify why texts need midrashic retelling today. To make my point, I can also draw on another area of emerging approaches to biblical studies, feminist biblical hermeneutics. In Jer. 2:1-3:25 Jeremiah retells Hosea's story of the broken marriage of YHWH and his unfaithful wife (Hos. 2). Most scholars recognize this prophetic borrowing,⁹ but what has been little noted is that Jeremiah does not simply repeat Hosea's story. He reinvents it.

The Hosean version of the marriage portrays YHWH as an angry heartbroken husband (Hos. 2). He addresses the children, urging them to intercede with their mother. Then he begins a long monologue that expresses his pain and humiliation for his beloved wife. He has given her everything, and she has not recognized him as the source of gifts, has failed to see his love, and has foolishly followed other lovers. In anger the Husband determines to lure her into the wilderness and win back her heart. He treats her rudely; he fences her in, deprives her of food, removes all her possessions and sources of life and nourishment in order to get her attention. He seeks to coerce her affections, but the story closes with the promise of a happy ending. Husband Yahweh promises to win her back and speaks of a future day when the marital relationship will be restored.

The book of Jeremiah (2:1-4:2) seriously alters Hosea's earlier account.¹⁰ Jeremiah has a new audience, in a new crisis, so he uses his Hosean legacy to suit his own purposes. Things are much worse than Hosea thought between God and wife Israel. In Jeremiah's version of the metaphor, the children are moved from the beginning of the story to its end (3:21-25). Jeremiah adds a male persona who, like female Judah, is charged with infidelity and with pursuing other gods. Yahweh's angry and brokenhearted monologue shifts between the two personae, both representing Israel. Both follow false gods, both betray YHWH, but female Judah, addressed with female singular pronouns, is attacked and shamed in sexually intimate ways. She is a whore, animal-like in her sexuality, unable to restrain her lust. Husband YHWH quotes her to report her intransigence. "It is hopeless, for I have loved strangers, and after them

I will go" (Jer. 2:25).

In Hosea's version of the broken marriage, restoration may be possible, but for Jeremiah, there is no hope, only divorce (Jer. 3:1-5). Not only that, in a new development in the story, wife Judah turns out to be YHWH's second spouse, more unfaithful even than the first (3:6-14). Neither wife responds; only the children return in repentance and faithfulness to YHWH.

The book of Jeremiah has created a new version of the Hosean metaphor of the broken marriage. It is likely that the children in the Jeremiah text represent the generation of exiles, the descendent of the Judah and Israel for whom there is still hope for the future. Both Hosea's and Jeremiah's versions of the metaphor address the specific circumstance of their communities. Both are immensely effective and affecting rhetoric. They draw upon the institution of marriage as known in the ancient world to portray YHWH in tearful monologues that win the readers immediately to the side of the husband.¹¹ Readers feel empathy for the divine anger and fury at the blind and foolish betrayal by his wife.¹² Rhetorically, both texts accuse Israel of sin, but Jeremiah uses the expanded version of this metaphor to explain the Exile. YHWH had no choice but to divorce his wife. She is cast out, but there is hope for the children if they repent.

From the point of view of intertextual studies, we see the creativity of Jeremiah in remolding Hosea's account. From the perspectives of rhetorical criticism, we gain a glimpse of the literary devices and emotional strategies the writers use to persuade their audiences to repent and return to lives of fidelity. Both methods of biblical studies provide preachers with models for preparing effective sermons and illustrate the power inherent in the texts, making them living events that might engage contemporary audiences. But using feminist biblical hermeneutics provides yet another angle of vision on the broken marriage and illustrates one reason why biblical old texts must be recreated for new situations.

Strictly speaking, feminist biblical hermeneutics is not a new method in biblical studies. Feminist interpreters use all manner of methods, old and new. Feminist biblical hermeneutics is a term that itself disguises much diversity among women.¹³ When contemporary feminist women and men read the stories of the broken marriage in Hosea, Jeremiah, and the later intertext in Ezekiel 16, other aspects of the marriage metaphor emerge. Husband YHWH, grief-stricken and angry at his wife's betrayal, also appears to modern eyes to be coercive and abusive. And the biblical metaphor is seen to represent marriage in frightful terms. The women in these prophetic texts have no voices, never speak, are only quoted by the angry husband. Female sinfulness alone in these passages is intimate, sexual, animal-like, and dirty. Men are shamed by the metaphor by being symbolically identified as women, and as the worst sort of unfaithful women. Men are clearly the intended audience of the text and it is they who are called to repent, and they who would most immediately identify with the Husband's fury. Because YHWH engages in abusive behavior against his wives, the ancient and modern practices of wife abuse, physical and verbal, are not only left unchallenged but actually sanctioned by divine example.

These suspicions raised by a feminist approach indicate why the biblical text cannot simply be repeated in modern contexts. Close study of the metaphor's rhetorical strategies reveals it to be another "text of terror."¹⁴ Its cultural distance from some in the believing community will create too much static for any salvific purposes

of the text to be heard at all. For others in the community, the gender roles described in the text might reinforce conditions they already live in.

Must the preacher, therefore, abandon the prophetic marriage metaphor as hopeless for a contemporary audience? I do not think so. These prophetic passages are too potent, too engaging, to be abandoned. Instead, the preacher might create a new intertext in a number of ways. Because everyone knows that belligerence and misrepresentation in marriages is not the sole prerogative of husbands, the preacher can retell the general story of the metaphor and change the gender of the characters. Such a retelling will not change the abusive nature of the divine-human relationship in the text, but it would provide an eye-opening way to invite the community to reflect on gender in the deity, on conceptions of marriage, and on justice in human relationships.

Alternatively, the preacher might retell one of these texts' account from the perspective of the silent wife, write her in, give her a voice, ask if Husband YHWH has not acted unjustly. Since the Hosean and Jeremiah texts clearly defend the justice of God in this miserable marriage and ultimately in the suffering of the nation, a preacher might retell the story of the marriage in a Joban manner, challenging divine justice toward the cast-aside wife and in the struggles facing the preacher's community. Or the preacher might alter the story so that both Husband and Wife speak to each other in mutuality and respect, exemplifying contemporary Christian hopes for marriages of love and shared power as a basis for rethinking the prophetic story in a new context.

Thinking about sermons as intertexts with biblical passages can assist in the art of preaching by encouraging faithful, critical, probing dialogue with the sacred text. Thinking about sermons as rhetorical efforts can help the preacher uncover the persuasive purposes of the original text and teach strategies for persuasion in the contemporary world. Finally, these newer methods in biblical studies can remind preachers that the act of preaching participates in and continues a process of retelling begun in the Bible itself.

Notes

¹ See the film, "Babette's Feast."

² John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure* (New York: Henry Holt), 1996, 43-61.

³ Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969).

⁴ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985).

⁵ Patricia Tull Willey's dissertation is entitled, "Remember the Former Things: Recollections of Previous Texts in Isaiah 40-55" (Emory University, 1996). Major ideas of that work appear in her convocation address, "Sing to God a New Song: Using the Past to Construct the Future," Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, September 1995.

⁶ Willey, "Sing to God a New Song," 4.

⁷ Michel M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁸ On rhetorical criticism, see Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context Method and the Book of Jonah* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

⁹ See William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah*, vol. 2 (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 45-47.

¹⁰ A. R. Diamond and Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Unfaithful Passion: Coding Women Coding Men in Jeremiah 2:1-4:2," *Biblical Interpretation*, forthcoming.

¹¹ Ibid., and see Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

¹² Weems, *Battered Love*

¹³ The umbrella term “feminist” obscures differences among interpreters working from women’s perspectives. African-Americans use the title “Womanist”, Hispanics use “*Mujerista*”, Asian-American women use “Asian Women Theologians.” These terms reflect the complex and multiple lives of women from a variety of ethnic, social, racial backgrounds.

¹⁴ See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).