

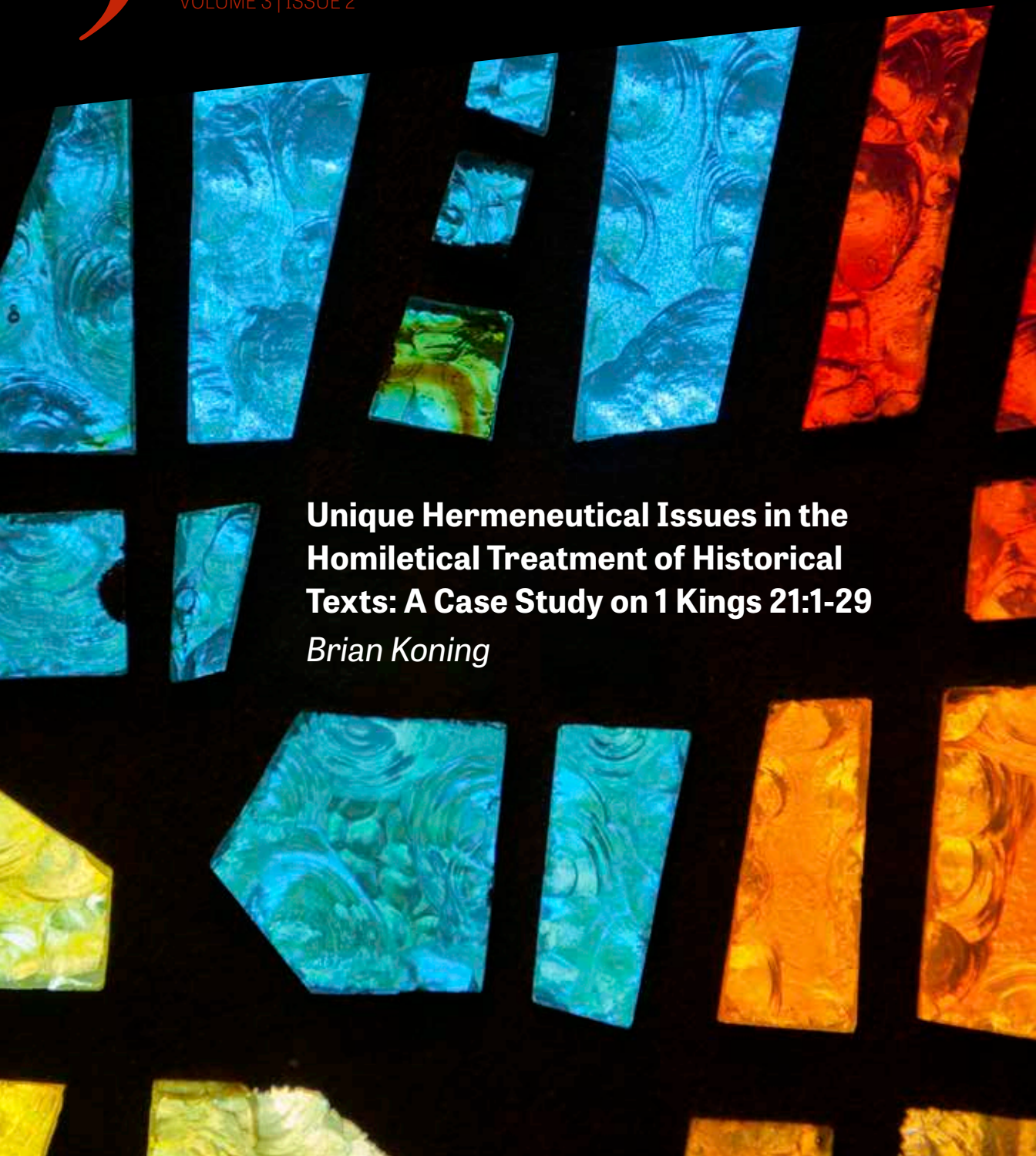
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Texts: A Case Study on 1 Kings 21:1-29**

*Brian Koning*



# Unique Hermeneutical Issues in the Homiletical Treatment of Historical Texts: A Case Study on 1 Kings 21:1-29

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**Abstract:** Any preaching of the Old Testament necessarily must face historical narrative passages. Properly handling these passages though presents certain unique difficulties, and often the texts are handled with substandard care. Traditional Aristotelian three-point sermons seem arbitrary or forced upon the text and do not capture the heart of the message. There is tension in handling historical narratives between moralizing the story to bring it from “then” to “now”, and treating it as a merely historical item of note. This article seeks to study the elements and methods of hermeneutics unique to historical texts with an eye towards proper preparation for homiletical use. What follows seeks to be a distillation of methodology on hermeneutics in general, towards a direct application to historical texts. It will be argued that to rightly handle the text, expositors must appreciate the text as both historical and redemptive in nature. Exegeting from that starting point will lead the expositor to work along the textual, epochal, and canonical horizons of the text. By carefully attending to the three horizons of a given biblical text, an expositor should be able to more fully capture and apply the teachings of God from historical passages to their modern church audience.

**Key Words:** 1 Kings 21, preaching, narrative, history, hermeneutics, typology, exegesis

## Introduction

The story of God’s interaction with his people through historical narrative constitutes the bulk of the Old Testament. As such, these passages deserve special attention and care in their preaching. Unfortunately, that care can often be lacking. Wanting that care, preachers may instead settle for a simple moralization of the text, or equally troubling, a segregation of the text as amoral history. Sadly, both choices have numerous examples to their name.<sup>1</sup> This is not an issue relegated to evangelical

1. For examples of moralizing a historical passage without reflection upon its nature as a historical text, see the sermon on Genesis 12 by Lisa Comes, “Claim Your Inheritance.” <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Article.aspx?articleid=6474> (accessed June 26, 2017).

circles, nor even broader Christian catholicism, but these issues can arise in the work of any group seeking to teach from these passages of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

It is not sufficient though to be able to point out what is wrong, one must strive to provide a basis for how these difficult texts can rightly be handled. To rightly handle the text, expositors must examine and know the value of the historical text, the horizons by which that text is understood, employ such knowledge to inform a given historical text, derive the theological principle(s) of the text, and then ultimately communicate those truths to a modern audience. This article will seek to study the elements and methods of hermeneutics unique to historical texts and present a synthesis of various approaches to the topic at hand.

One important caveat at the start. This article seeks to discuss those issues unique, or properly, more critical in handling historical passages. It is assumed that other standard hermeneutical tools should also be employed on these texts even if not explicitly mentioned. One cannot seek, in such a brief space, to be exhaustive in the methods and tools of the hermeneutical trade, nor would it be helpful to cover what has already received extensive treatment from much wiser sources. This article is seeking to distill and promote the salient points of hermeneutical work relevant to the historical texts and to frame them in a helpful and useful manner. Students and pastors alike should establish a baseline proficiency in hermeneutics from which this article seeks to build upon.<sup>3</sup>

### **Methodology for Historical Passages**

All preachers of the history of the Old Testament are faced with an initial question vital to their study. Graeme Goldsworthy states the issue best: “[This issue] has to do with whether historical texts should be treated mainly for their exemplary value or for their contribution to...salvation history.”<sup>4</sup> Decisions made at the beginning of an endeavor often have the most profound influence on events.<sup>5</sup> The exegete of Scripture would do well to bear such considerations in mind. When approaching a historical passage in the Old Testament they must be aware that their first steps or assumptions concerning the passage necessarily shape their future work. There are two spheres of

2. For an example from Latter Day Saints teaching, see the article from Elder Ronald Rasband, “Lessons from the Old Testament: Fleeing Temptation.” <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2006/03/lessons-from-the-old-testament-fleeing-temptation?lang=eng> (accessed June 26, 2017).

3. For examples of good baseline works on hermeneutics, see: Kevin VanHoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), or Stanley E. Porter Jr. and Beth M. Stowell, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, Spectrum Multiview Books (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2012).

4. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 141.

5. The novelist Frank Herbert captures this sentiment masterfully at the opening of his epic novel *Dune*. “A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct.” Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York, NY: Ace, 1965), 3.

thought that seem available to the exegete. First, historical narratives could be treated as moral lessons to be taken, spiritualized, and then repackaged for modern audiences. Second, historical narratives could be viewed as mere historical facts; stories to be retold as is without seeking to find spiritual virility within. Preachers must decide which then is the appropriate starting place for their work. Two considerations must be weighed in order to reach a verdict.

First, careful readers of the Hebrew canon will recognize that the characters portrayed are rarely presented as morally monolithic. Patriarchs and kings are presented as flawed sinners used by the grace of God.<sup>6</sup> One may rightly doubt then if adopting a purely moral approach to a given text is advisable. Indeed, “Serious misunderstanding can occur when individual episodes are viewed in isolation, rather than as part of their larger plot.”<sup>7</sup> Reading a historical passage to draw only moral conclusions from the persons portrayed lowers the biblical narrative to nothing more than one of Aesop’s fables; it becomes a story both impotent to bring spiritual growth, and blind to the redemptive plan of God.

Secondly, and conversely, it would be an error to assume such passages are merely historical artifacts without moral lessons. Kenneth S. Hemphill contends, “the Hebrew writers were not writing a history of the ancient Near East, but they were selecting and telling events designed to express their theological understanding of how history works.”<sup>8</sup> Such an observation is crucial, for it provides a much-needed counter-balance in understanding. While the historical texts of the Old Testament defy simple moralization, they do claim theological and peripateological<sup>9</sup> didactic intention within their communicative expressions.

It would seem then that the right balance to strike for the expositor is the *via media*. The best approach is to see the historical texts in a redemptive-historical light. Moral lessons can and are put down in history, but those lessons must be derived from the central character of the story: God. As Walter Kaiser contends, “The central character of the Bible is God... Therefore, the interpreter’s and expositor’s attention must be centered on God’s role in the narrative.”<sup>10</sup> Beginning with such a focus will lead the exegete to consider not just a text at hand, but where it fits into the revelation of God. For the historical passage, this is key as it leads to a framework where the exegete is to trace a passage along three different horizons: the textual, the epochal, and the canonical.

6. This can be seen in Jacob’s actions in Gn 34 or David’s indiscretions with Bathsheba in 2 Sm 11.

7. Lawrence A. Turner, *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 18.

8. Kenneth S. Hemphill, *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle*, Georg L. Klein ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 292.

9. Coined from the Greek περιπατεω (*peripateo*). That which is pertaining to regulation or conduct of one’s life.

10. Walter Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 70.

## The Three Horizons

Understanding a given text according to the textual, epochal, and canonical horizon is a framework that can and should be applied throughout Scripture. In many ways, it “is what all Christians have done, at least implicitly...in their reading and application of the biblical text,”<sup>11</sup> and is a well-advocated method.<sup>12</sup> Briefly, this method calls for the interpreter to first consider the immediate context of a passage: the textual horizon. Next, the eye is turned to consider when this text occurs in history and how it fits into God’s overarching redemptive plan for creation: the epochal horizon. Finally, the text is considered in light of the full, unified canon of Scripture: the canonical horizon. While this method can be applied to any portion of Scripture, it can and should be uniquely applied to historical narratives.

### The Textual Horizon

When understanding the historical text, it is important for the preacher to be aware of the artistry, in addition to the history, of the passage. The Western mind can often approach a text of Scripture with preconceptions born of thought patterns inculcated in modern literature. It is vital though to recognize that ancient storytelling may, and indeed does not always, share the same methods as its modern descendant. Instead, it is to the screenplay that modern audiences will find a greater degree of familiarity. As Kenneth Matthew states: “Cinematography provides a closer analogy to Hebrew narrative than modern literature.”<sup>13</sup> Merely because a text is historical does not mean it is free from artistry.<sup>14</sup> The history of the Old Testament can be viewed as a succession of scenes, linked one to another. Just as the camera can switch between long-shots and close-ups to bring the viewer through a story, so the telling of biblical narrative moves and shifts focus scene-to-scene to bring its audience through a story.<sup>15</sup> It is crucial then for workers in the text to have, at the very least, a basic understanding of how stories are put together. An understanding of classical quinary structure in narrative is necessary to faithfully preach the text.

11. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 93.

12. I am indebted to the excellent list of these works compiled by Gentry and Wellum. See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom*, 93 n. 27. For examples of the three-horizon approach, see: Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 259-311; Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), 16; D.A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 190; Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 147-180.

13. Kenneth A. Matthews, *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle*, Klein ed., 31-2. For others who draw this comparison, see Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1983), and Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem, IL: Hebrew University, 1986).

14. C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 250-1.

15. Berlin, 44.



Be it modern cinema or ancient folktale, the compulsion to craft cohesive and coherent stories of life is a constant throughout history.<sup>16</sup> In crafting a tale, most stories are composed of five basic events.<sup>17</sup> (1) The initial situation in which the story begins. (2) A complicating event that places obstacles between the protagonist and their goal. (3) A transforming action by which the characters seek to overcome and deal with the complication. (4) The dénouement where the transforming action resolves the issue. (5) The final situation in which the characters are left. While not every story contains all five elements, these are the basic building blocks of narrative.

For an example of how these elements work, consider the plot of George Lucas' first Star Wars movie, *A New Hope*. The movie opens on a title crawl which establishes the universe and the desire of the Rebels for freedom from tyranny (1). It next introduces the might of the Empire as seen first in the Star Destroyer, and later finally in the existence and use of the Death Star (2). The heroes of the film seek to recover the plans of the Death Star and deliver them to the Rebellion (3). The Rebellion uses the plans to launch a final attack on the Death Star and destroy it (4). With victory won, the heroes are celebrated and we close on their victory (5). This is certainly a crude and macro-level view of the story, but it goes to show how these story crafting elements can work.

It is crucial that the point is not missed in all this: the plot of the story must shape the preaching of the story. Indeed, “no factor plays a more central role than the plot of the narrative.”<sup>18</sup> To do true justice to the textual horizon of narrative, the exegete must wrestle with the plot and story crafting.<sup>19</sup> Preachers should understand historical passages through this structure, as opposed to a more traditional three-point sermonic structure. Stories cannot be distilled into three alliterated declarative statements, that is not how narrative is fundamentally crafted. Laurence Turner goes so far as to contend that if one simply thrusts upon the historical text “the frame of Aristotelian logic, you will be less successful” in preaching the said text.<sup>20</sup>

Return, briefly, to the example of *A New Hope* from above. Could one do justice to the story by presenting it in three logical points that flow one to another? Point one: the Empire are the bad guys in power. Point two: the Rebels are the good guys

16. “The narrative impulse is as old as our oldest literature.” Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.

17. Turner, *Reclaiming the Old Testament*, 16. These five basic stages, or acts, can be called the *quinary* structure of storytelling. Such is the terminology of Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism*, (London, UK: SCM Press, 1999).

18. Joe Linares, *Proclaiming God's Stories: How to Preach Old Testament Historical Narrative*, (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2009), 43.

19. Narratives are a selective record of events that the author has shaped into a form for a reason. For a fuller treatment of this point, see Peter T. Vogt, *Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook*, HOTE (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009), 48-60, or Robert Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook*, HOTE (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 25-88.

20. Turner, 13. Turner later calls the “proverbial three-point sermon structure...the kiss of death to an exposition on a narrative”, 20.

without power. Point three: the Rebels win because they steal a secret. While that broadly, and crudely, finds the contours of the plot, it is severely wanting. Preaching the story of the passage through attentiveness to the quinary structure of the story seems to be a simpler, more persuasive, and more faithful way to tell the story.

In addition to structural forms, the composer of narrative has many tools at their disposal in the crafting of a story. A story may be crafted to have: a unique point of view, a focus on *Leitwort* or keywording, repetition as an *inclusio*, or numerous other stylistic choices.<sup>21</sup> Attention to such matters can clue readers into the heart of the story as they appear both in the text proper or surrounding texts. Elements such as the ordering of events, ambiguity of the narrative, and naming of characters all deserve a student's gaze.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps most obvious, but still possibly overlooked in these passages, exegetes cannot leave their work on this horizon until they have settled the two most basic questions of interpretation: what was the author's intended meaning in the passages, and what need did it seek to address.<sup>23</sup> These are significant questions to settle as this establishes the baseline of interpretation and application. Rightly grasping the text in its original setting provides a launching pad from which to draw theological principles and applications for the modern audience.<sup>24</sup>

Uniquely for the historical passage, these questions should be addressed through the aide of understanding the narrative elements previously discussed. Finding elements such as repetition of keywords or chiasmic structure can greatly ease the preacher's task by highlighting the didactic intent of a passage. Such clues can be present both on the micro level of a single pericope,<sup>25</sup> or can even be seen in larger bodies of work.<sup>26</sup> Such attention to both the text of the story, as well as the place of the story in its literary context is vital for the preacher.

## The Epochal Horizon

Moving to the epochal horizon of a given text, preachers need to be aware of the applicable historical and literary setting for their passage. This dual focus should be seen through an engagement with both the *Sitz im Leben* and the *Sitz im Literatur* of a given text. Passages from the later monarchy of Judah do not share the same setting

21. For a list of some possible choices, see Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching*, 64.

22. Kissling, *Reclaiming the Old Testament*, 38-39.

23. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 285.

24. *Ibid.*, 285.

25. See the intentional chiasm in the organization of the flood narrative as put forward by James K. Hoffmeier, *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither*, Counter Points, Charles Halton and Stanley N. Gundry eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 50.

26. For example, see the chiasmic structure of Jacob's life as put forward by Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 46.

in life or literature as the patriarchal stories of Genesis. An eye then should be given to the history of the correct time and literary period for it may inform the text at hand.<sup>27</sup>

For the Old Testament itself, Graeme Goldsworthy identifies two major epochs of note.<sup>28</sup> The first runs from creation through the reign of Solomon. Here Goldsworthy sees the emphasis on “the way of salvation and the nature of the kingdom of God.”<sup>29</sup> The second epoch then runs from the divided kingdom through the end of the Hebrew canon. Unlike the first half, which sees promises being made and fulfilled to God’s people, here the focus is on the degeneration of the people of God. “The final indignity is for the descendants of Abraham to be deprived of every material pledge of God’s blessing: the land, the temple, the kingship.”<sup>30</sup>

Such observations should lead exegetes into asking pointed questions of their texts. What was the motivation or rationale of the author at hand? If one agrees with Hemphill’s previous contention that the historical stories are selective accounts intended to communicate truths, then what is the significance of a story’s selection? How does this story fit into the epochal theme in which it falls? On this last point, students must use care. One should not assume *carte blanche* that the message of a passage equates to its epochal theme. Even in darkness and degeneration stories may be given to show hope<sup>31</sup> or vice versa.<sup>32</sup>

Outside of the Old Testament proper, there should be an awareness of the historical world of the ancient Near East and the import it may bring to the table. As mentioned earlier, the writers of the Old Testament are historians, but not necessarily in the sense most modern readers expect.<sup>33</sup> With a proper understanding of the significant persons and events of ancient Near Eastern history, readers of the Bible can be clued into the significance of passages, especially when the Bible differs in what is seen as significant. As an example, a preacher of Chronicles would do well to note that the chronological subject matter parallels the books of Kings, but the intentionality does not. Whereas Kings seemingly focuses on the political, historical significance of kings, in Chronicles there is a unique intent in the author’s history as they focus on the covenant fidelity of the Davidic heirs.

27. V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 190.

28. Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 140.

29. *Ibid.*, 141.

30. *Ibid.*, 142. While one need not accept Goldsworthy as the final word on the matter, he offers a valuable starting point from which one can posit more nuanced themes. This article will utilize Goldsworthy on this point for the sake of space.

31. An example could be King Josiah who seems to stand against the general degradation of the faithfulness of Israel.

32. An example could be Lot’s Daughters who are not showing growing in faithfulness in the promises of God.

33. Hemphill, *Reclaiming*, 292.



## The Canonical Horizon

Lastly, the preacher should turn their eye towards the greater canon of Scripture. In this final step of the study, the focus is on Scripture's internal mechanisms of interpretation in light of the whole of revelation. Elements such as typology and quotation are the aspects to be considered to flesh out the meaning of a passage and pave the way for the application of the text in a modern setting. Ultimately the goal at this stage is to find the text's place in God's redemptive plan.

Typology seeks to find the elements of the Old Testament that are taken up as prefigures or foretastes of fuller realities in the New. The value for historical preaching should be evident from the definition; typological understanding leads one to naturally bridge the Old and New Testaments and thus ease the preacher's task in applying lessons to a modern audience. Caution though should be stressed, for without control or guidelines for discerning and applying types one runs the risk of slipping into allegory. For examples of typology becoming allegory, one can look to Justin Martyr seeing the cross throughout the Old Testament in "the tree of life in paradise, Moses' rod, the tree that sweetened the bitter waters of Marah, Jacob's rod and ladder, Aaron's rod, the oak of Mamre, the seventy willows of Ex. 15:27, Elisha's stick, and Judah's rod."<sup>34</sup> Such unchecked allegorizing distorts or misses the point of the Old Testament passage.

Sidney Greidanus offers the exegete a helpful list of checks and rules for discerning types and then applying them.<sup>35</sup> For a type to be genuine it must first be historical. This is significant for the work at hand, for if a type must be historical then it follows historical passages will contain types. Second, a genuine type must be theocentric, "that is, it has to do with *God's* acts in and through human persons and events."<sup>36</sup> Third, genuine types must have real correspondence to their antitype and cannot be merely superficial. Fourth, a genuine type will see escalation from its Old Testament origin to New Testament final form. By now it is clear why typology is to come at the end of the study. Without first grounding oneself in the literary and historical aspects of a text, a preacher cannot make the necessary judgments as to what constitutes a type and what does not. Having gone through that work on both the textual and epochal horizon though, verdicts can be rendered with more confidence.

34. Rowan A. Greer, "The Christian Bible and Its Interpretation." In *Early Biblical Interpretation*. James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer eds. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1986), 148. This criticism could be applied to many of the early interpreters of Scripture, as Greidanus points out, "For good or ill, Justin Martyr set the tone for early Christian interpretation of the Old Testament." (p.75). Martyr's connection also highlights the problem of analogy in interpretation as his connections are not necessarily wrong, perhaps better misapplied at points. Certainly, Christ is tied to Jacob's ladder, but is it through the cross or rather Christ Himself as the mediator between God and man? The latter appears the better connection. See Jn 1:51 for Jesus' own connection between the passages.

35. Greidanus, 256. All four signs of a genuine type follow from here.

36. *Ibid.*, 256. Emphasis his.

Concluding work on this horizon, the preacher should examine the citations of their passage in the rest of Scripture. It can be significant to see in what manner a historical event is alluded to or developed by future authors, or in what ways it draws upon previous passages. This can be beneficial as it also provides an avenue for application to a New Testament audience. Discernment should be shown, however, as the preacher should never lose sight that they are preaching the Old Testament text and not its citation later on. It cannot be assumed that later authors intend to fully capture the meaning of an event in a citation or allusion. For example, Paul's use of Genesis 12 in Galatians does not fully capture every aspect of the Genesis account. It would be a homiletical misstep to preach Genesis 12 solely as a pointer to Galatians 3 without regard for the other metanarrative threads present in the call of Abraham.

### **Modern Application**

Once the preacher has fully worked through a text as seen in its three horizons, then the final task of application to a modern context can get underway. Here the original decision, to view the text as both redemptive and historical in nature, bears fruit. Since the text is ultimately part of God's redemptive plan it will contain information relevant to the modern Church. Since the text is likewise historical, this information is more than allegory or chicken soup for the Christian soul. Rather it forms part of the backbone of the metanarrative of Scripture and allows modern audiences to not only see how God acted then but also what needs to be understood now.

As hinted through the canonical horizon, a preacher has several avenues by which to find the application. First and foremost, the exegete can look for a connection to Christ either by typology, analogy, or citation. A preacher should rightly ask of the text, "Why did this event have to occur before Christ came?" While it is possible to overly apply connections to Christ,<sup>37</sup> a preacher should start here and not depart unless convinced other theological points are at the fore of the text.

The second area of application to consider is the revelation of theology concerning God himself. Here again, preachers need to have put in the work understanding a given text. Statements of explicit theology rarely exist in historical narrative, but that does not mean those texts have nothing to say concerning theology. Rather, it means that "all historical events and artifacts require interpretation"<sup>38</sup> and its truths will not always be explicitly gleaned. Most narrative accounts, directly or indirectly,<sup>39</sup> teach the Church about God and how He acts for that is what those accounts deal with: God's interaction with people through history.

37. Spurgeon's spiritualizing of the Old Testament could be seen as such an example. For further reflection see Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 153-162, esp. 160-162.

38. Hemphill, *Reclaiming*, 291.

39. Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching*, 70.

Thirdly, the preacher of Old Testament history should seek to understand the stories for implications as to what it means to be the people of God. Such a connection between the Testaments is a contentious subject at best, and space prohibits exploring all the facets of Israel's relationship to the Church today. At a minimum level, however, it can be said that the heart attitudes of the people of God towards both Him and neighbor do not change between the Testaments.

Lastly, the preacher should evaluate the actions of the story characters for possible moral lessons. As has been argued, it is improper and misleading to solely moralize a story,<sup>40</sup> but that does not mean historical stories are devoid of such lessons. Rather, those lessons may be present, but are not often explicitly stated nor are they necessarily primary to the intent of the passage. Preachers must wrestle with the fact that men and women of the Old Testament are presented as real persons, not mythic figures. They may be capable of great virtue in certain instances but are far from perfect persons.

### **Case Study: 1 Kings 21**

Thus far, this work has sought to demonstrate the hermeneutical principles and methods that must be employed in exegeting a historical passage. The preacher has been called to view narrative texts as both redemptive and historical accounts. As such they are to be viewed with an eye towards theology and history. To test the validity and applicability of this method, a case study will now be briefly undertaken. The goal is to work through and demonstrate how this methodology can be applied to a specific pericope, namely 1 Kings 21:1-29.

#### **Case Study: Textual Horizon**

To begin work on 1 Kings 21:1-29, preachers should recognize its connection to the story thus far in the book of Kings. A new section of the narrative begins in 1 Kings 21; however, it is grammatically hooked in verse 4 to the previous section. The king is "sullen and vexed" (1 Kgs. 20:43 cf. 21:4, NASB) in both stories, and verse 1 of the text explicitly states the story occurs "after these things" (1 Kgs. 21:1). This should clue in the exegete that the events of the first story set the background for Ahab's mental and emotional frame of mind.

40. For an example, see Mike Grave's critique of Sidney Greidanus' moralizing of Jacob's experience at Bethel with Jesus' promise in Matthew 28. "For example, he says that 'preachers can use analogy to make the point that as Israel learned about God's protecting presence from Jacob's experience at Bethel before his hazardous journey, so Christ promises to be with us on our dangerous journey through life (analogy combined with New Testament reference such as Jesus' promise in Matthew 28:20).' But why bother with the Old Testament text if the promise of Jesus in Matthew is the point?" Mike Graves, "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method," *Review & Expositor* 97 (Winter 2000): 129.

A brief summary of 1 Kings 20, sufficient for purposes here, is as follows. Ahab is told by God that he will be victorious against an enemy, Ben-Hadad (v.13). Ahab goes out and is victorious, but instead of slaying the enemy of the people, he makes a covenant with him (v.34). For such an action, Ahab is told judgment will fall on his house; Israel and Ahab's lives are now exchanged for Ben-Hadad's (v.42). This judgment causes Ahab to withdraw from court life and is where the king is found in chapter 21.

Switching to the text proper, preachers should note the duplicated quinary structure being employed. Two scenes, tied together due to the resolution of the first inciting the second, appear in the text. The chapter crafts its narrative thusly: the initial situation of Ahab's desire (v. 1), the complicating event of Naboth's rejection (v. 2-4), the transforming action of Jezebel's plot (v. 5-10), the dénouement of Naboth's execution (v. 11-14), the conclusion with Ahab's taking possession of the vineyard (v. 15-16), the initial situation of Elijah's calling (v. 17-19), the complication of Naboth's murder (v. 18), the transforming action of judgment (v. 20-26), the dénouement of Ahab's repentance (v. 27), and the final situation of God's delayed pronouncement of judgment upon Ahab's lineage (v. 28-29).

In addition to the structure, preachers should also note the artistic tools employed to highlight the tension in the narrative. Naboth and Ahab are contrasted against one another, not merely through the inclusion of titles, but also by what they possess. Alexander Rofé observes, quite rightly, the stark contrast of vineyard to the palace. "Naboth has a vineyard which is the basic property of any Israelite; Ahab has a palace—hekāl [*sic*]. This is the contrast between bare necessity and luxury, lying at the basis of the plot."<sup>41</sup> By crafting a narrative with such a stark contrast, the author is priming his reader to experience outrage at what will unfold.

### **Case Study: Epochal Horizon**

According to Goldsworthy's understanding of Old Testament epochs, the story of 1 Kings 21 falls within the later degeneration focus. Such a theme fits the text well, for the general theme of the text does seem to focus on the Omride dynasty's fall in God's judgment and subsequent ultimate annihilation. The trajectory is downwards, and this story stands at the near bottom of Ahab's line. Such an observation should factor into the preacher's message.

Another item of major significance here is the book of Kings heavy emphasis on Ahab. Studying the ancient Near Eastern setting of the man should reveal an important clue, namely, that Ahab was not a significant king from a historical perspective. It was his father Omri,<sup>42</sup> not Ahab, that both established a dynastic line and Samaria

41. Alexander Rofé, "The Vineyard of Naboth: The Origin and Message of the Story." (*Vetus Testamentum* 38, 1, 1988), 90.

42. Mentioned in only thirteen verses as opposed to Ahab's seven chapters in 1 Kings.

as the capital of the kingdom. Marvin Sweeney notes that Tiglath-pileser III, over 140 years later, refers to Israel as the land of Omri.<sup>43</sup> Eugene Merrill sees this focus as theologically significant as “for the first time, the cult of Yahweh was officially replaced by paganism and not allowed to coexist with it.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Case Study: Canonical Horizon**

Canonically, preachers must understand the connections to the Torah that undergird the narrative and dialogue of the characters. According to Deuteronomy 17, the kings of Israel were to make a copy of the law and read it constantly (Dt. 17:18-20). The king was to uphold the commandments of the law for his people. This is vital for the crux of the story; Naboth’s rejection of Ahab’s request is based firmly in the law code.

The right of every Israelite family to their ancestral land is codified in the book of Leviticus.<sup>45</sup> This right of land is sensible, for in it a family could find food, shelter, and a chance for economic prosperity.<sup>46</sup> It is based on this law that Naboth refuses to sell his land; the law demanded that the land of Naboth be passed down as an inheritance.<sup>47</sup> Such a requirement not only should have been known to Ahab as a student of Torah but even applied to him.<sup>48</sup> The vital point then is that the one who should know and uphold Torah, i.e. Ahab, does not, but rather the lowly peasant is shown to have the moral high ground.

### **Modern Application**

Having worked through the method to this point, the pastor should have enough information to not only speak to what the story meant, but also what it means for a modern audience. Looking at all three horizons, it should be clear that there are several applications that are not satisfactory to apply here. First, one cannot find a solid type or analogy for Christ within the passage. No character, by act or office, can lead on in a clear manner to the cross.<sup>49</sup> Second, none of the actors present is a

43. Marvin Sweeney, *1 Kings*, Old Testament Library series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 203. See also ANET 284 and 320-21 for evidence of such naming.

44. Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 355. Sweeney would agree saying, “This is due to the DtrH interest in theological evaluation of Israel’s history and the key role of Ahab- and not Omri- as the worst of Israel’s monarchs”, 209. Also Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 115.

45. See Lev 25:23.

46. John Walton ed. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 90-1.

47. Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 256. Also: Philip J. King and L. E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 48-49.

48. See Eze 46:18.

49. Elijah could provide an avenue forward on this point. As a prophet sent to call the king back to repentance, preachers may find allusions to Christ here. Exegetes will need to decide whether that



fleshed out moral exemplar. Certainly, Ahab is horribly wicked, but even he repents and judgment is forestalled. The lesson of his life from this passage defies a simple prohibition of similar action. Likewise, Naboth is righteous in act, but he is a two-dimensional character without full form or volition. Audiences will rightly struggle to see themselves in his shoes without the preacher crafting a narrative beyond the text at hand.

A better application can be found in the revelation of God's justice. It is no small matter that the murder of a peasant by a king, an act not singular in nature nor oft marked in history, represents the final straw in God's judgment on the Omride dynasty. Many Naboths come and go, lost to the history of mankind, but they are not lost to God. This story is preserved so that the people of God might know that He sees, He remembers, and He is just. In the face of repentance, there is grace, but judgment must still fall for this violation of law and life. For the Church today then, especially those amidst hardship, they should be called to rest and trust in the justice of God for He sees and knows their situation. Those that do wrong, even if they escape the justice of law here, will be punished. "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hb 10:31).

A second application can be found in the need for knowledge of the word of God. Ahab's request to Naboth was not troubling from a cultural standpoint. Kings could and did buy vineyards for gardening was a hobby of kings,<sup>50</sup> and Ahab's offer of something in return is compatible with others of his time.<sup>51</sup> Taken against the word of God though, this act was grievously sinful. The kings of Israel were not free to act like their foreign counterparts.<sup>52</sup> The tie to modern churches then is of similar thrust, what culturally appropriate actions or attitudes have crept into our minds that are contrary to God's revealed will? Such a tack will strike closer to the hearts and minds of the audience than a simple prohibition to "not be like Ahab."

## Conclusion

The Old Testament poses a considerable hermeneutical issue for the modern exegete. In its pages, modern readers are brought back to a world not only separated from them by several thousand years but also distinct in culture and heritage. For European and American readers, it is a truly alien world. As such it can become a neglected

is the focal point of the text. This author does not see that connection as a major theme of the text, and thus does not explore it.

50. Alastair I. Mackay, *Farming and Gardening in the Bible* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1950), 40.

51. Nadav Na'aman, "Naboth's Vineyard and the Foundation of Jezreel" *JSOT* 33, 2, (2008), 211. He refers to Sargon II and his plans for building his new capital at Dur-Sharrukin. A similar offer of value for land is made.

52. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, "The Circumscription of the King: Deuteronomy 17:16-17 in Its Ancient Social Context." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 4 (2002): 601.

section of Scripture in the preaching and teaching life of the church. For some who do venture into its stories, often the message is distorted or lost for the hearers today.

This paper set out to both explicate and demonstrate principles unique to the hermeneutics of historical narratives in the Old Testament. It is important that these passages are not reduced to fables or Sunday school stories for children, for doing so misses a vital and major swath of God's revelation for his people. By carefully attending to the three horizons of a given biblical text, a preacher should be able to more fully capture and apply the teachings of God from historical passages to their modern church audience. It is my hope that this work can, in some small way, bring together many voices to offer a help and guide for students to go forward with confidence in the preaching of the historical passages of the Old Testament.