

Complementarity is Best

Gail Ramshaw

The Roman Catholic three-year lectionary appoints three readings each Sunday and festival, the first reading of which always connects in some way with the gospel reading. Christians who use the various Protestant versions of the three-year lectionary have not agreed on whether or not this pattern is the best or the only way to encounter the Old Testament at Sunday worship. In consequence of this hermeneutical impasse, *The Revised Common Lectionary*¹ presents two options for each Sunday during the post-Pentecost season. In one set, the first reading connects in some way with the gospel, and in the other set, the books of the Hebrew Scriptures are read semi-continuously, in the style of the second reading. In practice, entire church bodies have chosen one option or the other, and thus many users of the lectionary – who know only the readings as stipulated for them by their denominational resources – are not aware of this unresolved hermeneutical debate. In this article I present the position that the complementary pairing of the first reading with the gospel is the best way to deliver the three readings each Sunday.

Lectionary Preaching is Not Bible Study

The three-year lectionary was constructed to proclaim the paschal mystery and to accompany the weekly Eucharist of the Christian assembly. Thus each set of readings is meant to illumine the death and resurrection of Christ. If there are parishes that proclaim only one – perhaps the first – of the three readings each Sunday, they are not using the lectionary as it was intended, in

1. Consultation on Common Texts, *The Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

which case my arguments will be of no consequence to them. In such usage, the semi-continuous track is actually functioning as Bible study, not proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ. Were I judging whether the semi-continuous Old Testament track is a useful scheme for parish instruction, I would have much to say about both its advantages and its deficiencies. Having been reared in the Missouri Synod and having taken six seminary courses with Raymond Brown,² I fiercely advocate that Christians know the Bible. However, I do not understand the Sunday proclamation to be the same thing as Bible study. My question about the lectionary must be: how best can what parts of the Hebrew Scriptures be incorporated into the Christian celebration of Eucharist?

The Bible is Not a History Book

At the time of the printing of entire Bibles, the medieval practice of depicting side by side parallel stories from the Old and the New Testaments, whether in books³ or on church walls and furnishings, yielded to a chronological conception of the Bible. The Bible came to be thought of as a single book of history, read from start to finish. It is instructive to realize, by contrast and for example, that Augustine would never have seen a Bible as a single book. Although the Lutheranism of my childhood never read from the Old Testament at Sunday worship, my catechesis required that I memorize the kings of Judah and the kings of Israel because my teachers, borderline fundamentalists, believed that the Bible is a factual record dictated by God, history that a devout Christian ought to know.

However, most of the users of the three-year lectionary are not fundamentalists, and our churches teach that even those books that purport to be history are only metaphorically history; that is,

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2. See for example Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966); idem, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970).
 3. See for example *Biblia Pauperum: A Facsimile and Edition*, ed. Avril Henry (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

mythistory perpetuating the religious values that were maintained by some ancient Jews. We must judge which parts of the Bible enhance Christian faith; which selections from its myth, legend, poetry, catechesis, court propaganda, and prophetic criticism contribute to Christian proclamation; which of its obscure references, alien worldviews, and other-than-Christian ethics are essential additions to the communal celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ. It is my experience that many preachers who studied the Bible critically do not preach it critically, but pretend from the pulpit that the texts report history. Parishioners then encounter – in popular media, for example – the fact that biblical accounts of the Exodus cannot be regarded as in any way historically accurate,⁴ and our hermeneutical confusion – if not cowardice – is exposed.

A Replacement Theology is Bankrupt

Although we are glad that Marcion's position – that Christians had best ignore the Hebrew Scriptures on Sunday morning – did not prevail, many of us are chagrined at the medieval solution to the question of Christian use of the Old Testament. We are embarrassed by the replacement theology that denigrated the entire Hebrew tradition as being the shadow side of Christian grace. We reject a worldview that construes centuries of human life as some kind of negative object lesson for the Christian, and we are ashamed of the anti-Semitism that this theology supported. Much of what was termed "typology" strikes us as a bizarre misreading of the Bible, and Protestantism has been deeply influenced by the Reformation rejection of medieval hermeneutical techniques. Despite all this, one can still find some poor parallels in the current lectionaries, and it is important to state that dedication to the technique of complementarity need not claim that every one of the three-year lectionary's nearly two hundred pairings is a prizewinner.

4. See for example discussions in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, ed. David L. Lieber (New York: Jewish Publications Society, 2001).

The Old Testament Functions as Image

There remains a third option. The Old Testament can be received by the eucharistic community neither as a historical record, nor as a foil against which the gospel stands, but as the root from which the gospel springs. According to this hermeneutic, the old covenant is filled with images of divine grace.⁵ The new covenant only confirms the mercy granted to God's people from the beginning of our storytelling. As Luke says, Jesus explains to the disciples on the road to Emmaus "all the things about himself in all the scriptures." For not only do the New Testament writers rely on the Jewish tradition for the very categories of their experience of God, but they re-use the patterns of its praise to rehearse the death and resurrection of Christ. The details of Christ's trial and execution found in the passion narratives rely as much, if not more, on the Psalms than on eyewitness accounts. Thus the primary reason that Christians should know the Old Testament is that without such knowledge, their understanding of the New Testament will be limited, even erroneous. Christians need not be biblical scholars, or students of ancient Near Eastern documents, but they do need to encounter the New Testament and its proclamation of Jesus Christ, and to do that well, they need to know some parts of the Hebrew tradition.

It follows that the medium is the message. If we tie the Old to the New, we demonstrate that reliance of the New on the Old. If, on the other hand, we proclaim the Old without reference to the New, the question about why Christians are reading those books at all remains unanswered. It is instructive to examine several such pairings from the post-Pentecost season to see the technique of complementarity at its best.

The Old Illumines the New

In Year B, the gospel for Proper 6 is the parable of the mustard seed. Many sermons approach this text with what my English teacher called "the wide truths of life": little beginnings grow into

5. See Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) for a thorough discussion of this point.

great endings. This interpretation does not hold up when you discover that the mustard bush is not a great ending but a scrubby annual when you try to fit this “wide truth of life” with Mark’s messianic secret. However, in the complementary track, this gospel reading is set next to the poem from Ezekiel 17 about the ancient Near Eastern image of the mythic tree of life. We hear the echo of the birds in the branches. We think of the paradox of the mustard bush being a tree of life, and we realize that the parable is a remarkable example of Mark’s message that the hidden Christ is the life of the world. The parallel provided by the Ezekiel reading is necessary to our understanding of how Mark is using the parable. Reading the two passages side by side helps the hearers to understand the meaning of the gospel.

Wisdom Speaks to Christians

The current resuscitation of Wisdom is evident in hymns, catechesis, and popular literature. Yet one must ask, what is the Christian use of Wisdom, who was perhaps an ancient goddess, perhaps only a literary construct of an ancient androcentric society? (In either case, we must admit that all too often a societal elevation of a divine female compensated for the low status of its actual women.) In the complementary track, Wisdom presents herself on Proper 15 of Year B, toward the conclusion of the five weeks of John 6.⁶ She is calling out to us to eat her bread and drink her wine and to walk in the way of insight. For Christians, this Wisdom is found in Christ, in his bread and wine, in her way of insight. The complementary passage from John 6 reiterates the message that eating and drinking brings life. By pairing the Wisdom poem with the Johannine discourse, the lectionary gives us something Christian to do with Wisdom. The point is not to introduce a goddess into our religious system, but to present an image of Christ.

6. For a homiletical guide through the five weeks of John 6, see *New Proclamation: Year B, 2003, Easter through Pentecost*, ed. Harold Rast (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

We Enter into the Old Testament Narratives

If most of the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures never occurred, and their worldview and ethics are troublesome for contemporary Christians, why narrate them during the Eucharist? The idea in the lectionary is that the Old Testament's characters are examples of us, pictures of sin and mercy, parallels to Christian narratives. Take for example the stories of Abraham. In the complementary set of first readings, the story of Abraham and Sarah serving a meal to the three visitors at Mamre is read parallel with the story of Jesus eating with Mary and Martha (Year C, Proper 11). In both stories, the people discover that they are eating with God, as we ourselves do at the Eucharist that follows. The story of Abraham pleading for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is read parallel with Jesus' instruction about how to pray (Year C, Proper 12). The Christian realizes that God's people have always pleaded for the life of others, just as the assembly will do after the sermon in the prayer of intercession. By this technique of complementarity, the biblical memories of Abraham serve a Christian purpose: they ground the contemporary baptized assembly in the long tradition of faithful prayer. Of course, various communities of Jews will use Abraham in their various ways.⁷ The lectionary presents a way for Christians to incorporate Abraham's narrative into eucharistic worship.

We Heed the Prophets

Christians have found the prophetic passages in the Hebrew Scriptures more central to contemporary proclamation than have Jews. Yet the countless historical details found in the Prophets make these books more amenable to serious study outside the liturgy than to short excerpts incorporated into weekly worship. Granting this, it is interesting to see how the complementary track utilizes the Prophets: the prophetic writings are a window through

7. For a discussion of the two different trajectories of the Hebrew Scriptures after the destruction of the temple, see Paul M. van Buren, *According to the Scriptures: The Origins of the Gospel and of the Church's New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

which we view the Spirit of God in the world. For example, Jesus' teaching about care for the poor by means of the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Year C, Proper 21) is far from unique in the Jewish tradition. In fact, Jesus here reiterates a central teaching of the prophets, and to make this clear, the first reading cites Amos, warning the rich that their life of luxury will not last. Jesus' instruction about faith and his call for a life spent in faithful service (Year C, Proper 22) stands parallel with Habakkuk's call to a life spent in faithful service. By these complementary pairings, the prophets become not distant persons in a society that no longer exists, but images of Christ and now of the body of Christ, calling for a renewal of our life in our society.

Complementary Readings Attend to Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory

All of us who, in our readings, hymns, and prayers, cite more than a single passage of scripture on a Sunday morning need to inquire how these various pieces of scripture will fit together in the worshippers' minds. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory offers considerable assistance in this regard.⁸ Simply stated, the human mind tries to find coherence in a group of disparate objects or events. If there is not an intentional coherence, the human mind will attempt to construct some pattern, since the psyche craves order and meaning. To argue that we can be content with a morning's event that contains many and various disconnected modules is to deny the way the human mind functions. That the mind seeks connection argues for readings chosen by means of complementarity. This theory would suggest that in fifty years, when the next lectionary revision is undertaken, the second reading should cohere with the gospel for the day.

8. Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 29-30.

Complementary Readings Take Seriously the Postmodern Worldview

I recall in college delighting in *The Book of the Acts of God*.⁹ The authors presented the Bible as the great Christian meta-narrative that by faith we could appropriate. The grand story made sense from its beginning through its end, and we participated in that meta-narrative by entering into it emotionally or sacramentally. This modern view of the Bible was a primary influence behind the construction of the three-year lectionary, and the desire to be inserted into the meta-narrative is part of why semi-continuous readings appear to be an attractive option.

However, the Bible as meta-narrative is not a persuasive idea for the postmodern person. The postmodernist distrusts meta-narratives and rejects their purported meaning. What the modernist might explain away – for example, the androcentrism of the narratives – can become the primary focus of interest for the postmodernist, who connects more fully with individual blips than with the big picture. For the postmodernist, the whole myth of David has less interest than perhaps one single narrative incident that for some reason strikes a personal connection. The postmodernist sees no difficulty in focusing on a single poem about social justice taken out of its literary context and laid before the assembly, as long as that poem is rich in rhetoric and striking in its approach. As postmodernists seek to construct a coherence a-la-Ricoeur, it is the liturgical event itself, not some biblical meta-narrative, that the blips fit within. The prophetic poem about social justice has not been taken out of context as it stands alongside the Lucan parable, since the context is the Christian eucharistic assembly.

Each semester in my university classrooms I interact with approximately eighty young Christians. As I observe the difficulty with which they try to fit into their selves the secular world and their inherited religious belief, I repeatedly must ask myself: why

9. George Ernest Wright and Reginald Horace Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God: Christian Scholarship Interprets the Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957).

should they know what about the Bible? The discussion about lectionary only narrows the question: what parts of the Bible should my students encounter when they attend the liturgy, and how will they make sense of the scripture they hear? Heightening the difficulty of our decisions is that lectionary selection is a zero-sum game: for every reading that goes in, one must go out. For this fascinating conundrum, I find the option that the first reading complement the gospel to be the best pattern available for us all.

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