

Leaping into the Void of Old Testament Narrative

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Abstract

When preaching from Old Testament (OT) narrative, the temptation can be to rush to the New Testament in an attempt to resolve difficult and confronting depictions of God and faith. However, to bring the gospel to bear on Old Testament texts without first allowing the text to confront and even confound the preacher, is to silence the text. In teaching Presbyterian ministry interns how to teach from OT narrative and to stay in the text, I draw on Elie Wiesel's treatment of Genesis 22:1–19, 'The Binding of Isaac'. As a Jewish scholar, Wiesel delves deeply into the narrative and models how to question the text. Building on this, a case is made to engage in the apparent gaps and void in OT narratives searching for meaning inspired by a Midrashic approach. To ensure that Christian exegetical practices are still employed, a model for reading OT narratives is advanced.

This article is a reflection on my experience of teaching ministry interns how to preach Old Testament (OT) narrative.¹ In the book, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (David and Hays 2003), the opening chapter begins with nine theses on the interpretation of Scripture. The eighth one is: Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the church (Davis and Hays 2003, 4). The question is posed: "How do we pursue the tasks of learning (again) to read Scripture faithfully in the church while also being in dialogue with those outside?" (Davis and Hays 2003, 5). Later in that publication, this challenge is coloured in by calling for reading in dialogue with Jewish interpretation and understanding.

My approach when teaching how to preach from OT narrative, is to use the story of The Sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22). I do so by using a 'diverse other'; a Jew, to guide and illustrate this art: the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. This author is best known for his book entitled *Night*. This small volume is one of the most heart wrenching accounts of a person's trauma in Auschwitz. Along with that, also one of the most confronting and compelling wrestling of faith in God and what appears to be the death of that faith. In his book *Messengers of God*, Wiesel writes a riveting chapter on the events of Genesis 22. He entitles it: 'The Sacrifice of Isaac: a survivor's story.'

As a survivor of the Holocaust he grounds the story in that hellish context; and Genesis 22 becomes a number of things:

¹ The substance of this article was presented at the 2019 conference of the Australasian Academy on Homiletics in Sydney.

- A lens by which he views that experience
- A script by which he speaks about that experience
- A vessel by which he holds that experience
- A prayer by which he survives that experience

Yet he does so with a light touch. Extraordinarily he does not drown Genesis 22 out with his own experiences. He allows the text to have the first word and masterfully weaves the Biblical story, humanity's story, and his own story, throughout.

In teaching preaching I have noted a struggle and reluctance in preachers to preach from the OT. And when they do, they engage in a form of hero-worship at the expense of the integrity of the Biblical text. Such preaching tends to be marked by three tendencies:

- A tendency to elevate Biblical characters at the expense of wrestling with the presence of their flaws; and that they nevertheless fulfil the purposes of God in their own generation (Acts 13:36)
- A tendency to fail to recognise God as the hero of the story
- A tendency to land the sermon in the NT and Jesus with undue haste. All too often with an absence of depth, freshness, and sophistication.

This is where Elie Wiesel and Genesis 22 come to our aid as teachers of Christian preachers.

A 'Diverse Other' modelling 'Excellent Practice'

Elie Wiesel's engagement with Genesis 22 demonstrates how someone dwells in the story with integrity, authenticity and restraint (Wiesel 1976). Wiesel shows restraint in that he does not rush to try and resolve the agony, mystery and tension present in the telling of Abraham and Isaac's terrible and haunting journey to Mount Moriah. I find it challenging that Elie Wiesel stays with the emotional anguish of the story and yet comes to a place of life. He retains the raw power of the mystery and difficulty of the story. Yet, what I find even more helpful is that he takes issue with the Christian interpretation of the story. He highlights two particular Christian interpretations. He engages specifically with Søren Kierkegaard's treatment of Genesis 22 (Kierkegaard 1939) where Kierkegaard wrestles with situational ethics. Wiesel engages generally with how Christian interpretation of Genesis 22 prefigures the crucifixion. Wiesel makes the point that In Jewish tradition death cannot be used as a means of glorifying God. Consequently, I find that he causes us as Christian preachers to wrestle and work with the Biblical text more intentionally and intensely, and for longer.

David Lose (2008) makes the case that "frequent exposure to examples of excellent practice" (Lose 2008, 45) is one key influence which can impact the development of preachers. Lose uses the examples of consistently reading to a small child or Shinichi Suzuki's method of teaching the violin by exposing

students to hours of listening to masterful performances: the strategy in a word is “immersion.” Wiesel’s engagement with Genesis 22 is all of that: immersion. For Christian preachers, Wiesel provides an example of excellent practice.

In telling the story of Genesis 22, Wiesel shows how it is biographical for him as a young boy through to him as a grown Holocaust survivor. He shows how it is biographical for Israel as a Biblical entity through to a suffering people culminating in the events of places such as Auschwitz. He shows how it is biographical of his faith and spirituality, and of his people.

In using Elie Wiesel as someone to dialogue with in this exercise there is something crucial to understand. In his book, *The Jesus Way*, Eugene Peterson (2007) describes his confusion in reading Wiesel’s apparent faith-less *Night* and then later the faith-full *Souls on Fire* (1972) and *Messengers of God* (1976).

What was going on here? What had happened between *Night* and *Souls on Fire*? How is it that this tragic, Lazarus-like figure had moved from telling stories of the death of Jews and the death of God to telling stories about persons who live exuberantly by faith in God?” (Peterson 2007, 158).

Peterson describes his confusion as the backdrop, when one day, he discovers Wiesel was to give a lecture near where Peterson lived. Peterson went to listen to him to try and fathom what happened and how it happened: “this resurrection from the Auschwitz/Buchenwald *Night*.” (Peterson 2007, 159). He did not receive an answer, but that night Wiesel did say this:

Nothing is worthwhile compared to this – searching Scripture, asking questions of the text, seeking the truth of God’s word (Peterson 2007, 158-159).

I think I can provide part of an answer to Peterson’s wondering. An answer that is important in understanding something of who this is who helps guide us through OT narrative. In early 2016, my daughter went to Yad Vasham (Israel) on a scholarship. There she met and was lectured by a former student and close friend of Elie Wiesel’s, Dr Alan Rosen. Dr Rosen and I corresponded about my use of Elie Wiesel’s material on Genesis 22 when teaching preaching from OT narrative. I commented about the life I noted in Elie Wiesel’s work: no matter how dark the story. In private correspondence, Dr Rosen replied (and in doing so partly answers Eugene Peterson’s wondering):²

The original title of *Messengers of God* is (in French) “Celebration of the Bible.” Indeed, each of his books focusing on the study of Jewish tradition has “Celebration” in the title. So along with the ability to “linger” over a text, which you speak about so beautifully, I would say that the “celebration” of study is a key element—and, as Elie Wiesel writes in his introduction to the new edition of *Souls on Fire*, a celebration of life. Thus, any study, according to my teacher, must be a path toward intensifying the celebration of life. (Perhaps this is indeed what you are referring to when you write that your students “gain life”?). The Holocaust has, of course, its own special daunting challenges. But I would say that a key element of reading *Night* is to appreciate how this book served Elie Wiesel as a departure point for the extraordinary life that followed. *Night* was not an end point, but rather a beginning. And I hope I am understanding his words to me

² This extract from our correspondence is used with permission from Dr Rosen.

rightly when I say that it must be read in that spirit.

So, in being confronted with the darkness of Genesis 22, our teacher does so with a particular kind of spirit: one which celebrates life. This, then, is our diverse other, a Jewish commentator, who is outside of the church, immerses us in the text, provides an example of excellent practice, and therefore helps us to learn to read Scripture faithfully in the church.

Losing and finding ourselves in *akeda*

In Jewish tradition, the title given to the story of Genesis 22 is *Akeda*. *Akeda* is taken from Genesis 22:9 when Isaac is bound. So, in Jewish tradition the account is known as “The Binding of Isaac” while in Christian tradition it is known as “The Sacrifice of Isaac.” In the Midrash, the *Akeda* theme occupies an important place as creation and the giving of the Law at Sinai (Wiesel 1976). Its significance, and therefore its value as being a template in teaching preaching from OT narrative, is captured in the opening words by Wiesel describing *Akeda*

Terrifying in content, it has become a source of consolation to those who, in retelling it, make it part of their own experience. Here is a story that contains Jewish destiny in its totality, just as the flame is contained in the single spark by which it comes to life. Every major theme, every passion and obsession that make Judaism the adventure that it is, can be traced back to it: man’s [sic] anguish when he finds himself face to face with God, his quest for purity and purpose, the conflict of having to choose between dreams of the past and dreams of the future, between absolute faith and absolute justice, between the need to obey God’s will and to rebel against it; between his yearnings for freedom and for sacrifice, his desire to justify hope and despair with words and silence – the same words and the same silence. It is all there (Wiesel 1976, 69):.

Eden (creation) and Sinai have clear implications for our understanding of the gospel. Given Jewish tradition gives Moriah equal importance alongside Eden and Sinai, using this text in the teaching of preaching aids our technical approach to such texts *and* our theological understanding. In discussing the effect of *Akeda* in both Jewish and Christian faith, Clemens Thoma (Moberly 2003) coins the phrase *Akeda*-spirituality. Thoma describes how (Moberly 2003, 183):

The story motivated people to accept obediently and submissively in their lives what seemed incomprehensible, unendurable and contradictory and to reflect upon it . . . Ultimately the person concerned with *Akeda*-spirituality concentrates his [sic] inner sensibilities neither on Abraham nor on Isaac, nor on the two of them together, but on the God of Abraham, Isaac and other great witnesses of faithful obedience.

With particular reference to *Akeda*, R.W.L. Moberly (2003) outlines five principles to aid Christian engagement with the OT. With Genesis 22 as the centrepiece, these principles strike a beautiful balance between the science and art of interpreting OT narrative and preaching it (Moberly 2003, 188-189):

1. “The world of the Bible is still in a real sense our world.” Two things remain consistent: human nature and its wrestling with good and evil; and the nature of the only true God with whom humanity relates to.
2. “The Bible is our own particular story, as Christians.” The Bible is the story of how and why there are such people as Jews and Christians. Our growth rests on the ongoing absorption of this story.

3. "We must read the scriptural text with total imaginative seriousness." We must exegete and imagine: we must ask questions about the text but not at the cost of questioning of what the text is about.³
4. "Scripture consistently (though not, of course, exclusively) deals with the basic and perennial issues of life." While we acknowledge this, our common practice is to blunt the force of the text by making it sound "trite and moralistic or make every biblical writer sound like a certain popular understanding of St Paul."
5. "Because the enduring issues of life and death are at heart moral and spiritual issues, we become better at engaging with them insofar as we grow in our own moral and spiritual literacy." This calls for a deep commitment to attend to Scripture with an openness which exposes us to the agency of God and others as we seek to live according to the Scriptures.

One of the main reasons I use Wiesel's work on *Akeda* is because he models what it looks like to take up residence in a Biblical text: as if your life depended upon it. Wiesel models a close and careful reading of the text. Any Christian preacher would admire his work in this regard. For instance, his refusal to sanitise the account:

This strange tale is about fear and faith, fear and defiance, fear and laughter (Wiesel 1976, 62).

His bewilderment about the actions of those in the story (Wiesel 1976, 73):

As a child, I read and reread this tale, my heart beating wildly; I felt dark apprehension come over me and carry me far away.

There was no understanding the three characters. Why would God, the merciful Father, demand that Abraham become inhuman, and why would Abraham accept? And Isaac, why did he submit so meekly? Not having received a direct order to let himself be sacrificed, why did he consent?

His deep honesty about the effect that the *Akeda* had on him:

To me the *Akeda* was an unfathomable mystery given to every generation, to be relived, if not solved – one of the great mysteries of our history, a mystery so opaque that it obscures not only the facts but also the names of the protagonists.

Why did Abraham, the would-be slaughterer, become, in our prayers, the symbol of *hesed*: grace, compassion and love? A symbol of love, he who was ready to throttle his son?

And Isaac, why was he called Isaac? *Yitzhak*? He who will laugh? Laugh at whom? At what? Or, as Sarah thought, he who will make others laugh? Why was the most tragic figure in Biblical history given such a bizarre name? (Wiesel 1976, 75)

His simple yet devastatingly haunted comment: "Then one day God decided once more to test him . . . Take your son and bring him to Me as an offering. The term used is *ola*, which means an offering that has been totally consumed, a holocaust" (Wiesel 1976, 71). His exploration of the phrase "only son

³ Moberly has the helpful analogy of watching a film. We can distance ourselves from moments of uncomfortableness by saying "It's only a film" or "They're only special effects." However, it does not make much difference, we are still affected. Where is such an approach in our engagement with the Bible? (Moberly 2003, 189).

whom you love” when referring to Isaac but at what expense to Ishmael. His observation that in a story marked by Abraham’s three-fold response “Here am I”; it is absent after God says he wants Isaac as a burnt offering.

His observation of the spirituality and consistency of the response “Here I am.” By the time Abraham says it for the third time it is the same as the first time. Wiesel unpacks Abraham’s three-times three-word response: “*Here I am*. I am the same, the same person who answered Your first call; I answer Your call, whatever its nature; and even were *it* to change, *I* would not” (Wiesel 1976, 82).

His observation of the two-time phrase “and the two of them walked on together” (Gen. 22:6, 8). The phrase appears for the first time when Abraham and Isaac leave the two servants and begin the final march up Mount Moriah. The second time is after Abraham responds to Isaac asking where was the lamb for the sacrifice?

The march continued. The two of them alone in the world, encircled by God’s unfathomable design. But they were *together*. Now the repetition renders a new sound while adding to the dramatic intensity of the narrative (Wiesel 1976, 81).

His observation that the account finishes with Scripture saying Abraham returned to the servants, no mention of Isaac. It is from the basis of such close reading of the text, that Wiesel is left with questions that the narrative does not address (Wiesel 1976, 83):

And Abraham returned to his servants . . . He, Abraham. Alone. And Isaac? Where was Isaac? Why was he not with his father? What had happened to him? Are we to understand that father and son were no longer together? That the experience they just shared had separated them – albeit only *after* the event? That Isaac, unlike Abraham, was no longer the same person, that the real Isaac remained there, on the altar?

This is where I find Wiesel and his faith tradition especially challenging, inspiring and risky.

The void

In her book, *Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament*, Elizabeth Achtemeier engages with the *Akeda*. She cautions the preacher: “

Over the whole tale lies a touching reticence, and such restraint on the part of the storyteller should mark also the preacher’s sermon. We should not speculate about what the text does not say (Achtemeier 1988, 18).

Achtemeier’s position is standard exegetical practice.

Along with that, in his commentary on Genesis, Bruce Waltke outlines various literary devices in Genesis. He makes the distinction between ‘gaps’ and ‘blanks’. A gap is an intentional omission, whereas a blank is an inconsequential omission (Waltke 2001, 40).⁴

⁴However, it is difficult to know what is a gap and what is a blank. Throughout his commentary, Waltke includes commentary on gaps and blanks in the text. At times he includes sections entitled “Gaps” and other times “Blanks.” On occasions he includes sections entitled “Blanks and Gaps” and as a reader you are left not sure which is which. For instance, in the *Akeda*, Waltke

Waltke's observation invites exploration of the text and imagination. By contrast – where the text is silent, Wiesel is not. And in the presence of an apparent inconsequential blank – Wiesel sees significance. To be more accurate, it is not so much Wiesel as much as his in-depth knowledge of the rabbinical commentary the *Midrash*. Wiesel shows, as a diverse-other dialogue partner, that the *Midrash* considers the silence of the text (the blanks) a rich fertile seed-bed for spiritual reflection and pondering. The *Midrash* tells stories about the Biblical story within the story. "As always in the Midrash, these parables reflect the dramatic demands of the narrative. Through them, internal conflicts become tangible, visible" (Wiesel 1976, 86). Wiesel's practice inspires engagement with the spirit and power of the text and imagination.

Peering into the Void

Taking Achtemeier's, Waltke's and Wiesel's differing contributions, what are we to do? At risk of oversimplifying their counsel about studying OT narrative, especially the apparent missing details (and note, they all use the *Akeda* as a case-study), they each have counsel for the preacher seeking to understand the OT text.

- Achtemeier essentially says, 'Where the text is silent; stay silent.'
- Waltke says, 'Where the text is silent; work out if it is a meaningful gap or an inconsequential blank.'
- Wiesel says, 'Where the text is silent: wrestle; imagine; question; create; tell stories.'

Edging towards the void

I consider these three voices and I am caught between the tension of being a sound exegete and the call to be creative. Moberly's (2003) earlier statements (remember - centred on Genesis 22) become especially apt and the invitation to take a risk. Especially the essence of his third, fourth and fifth statements (Moberly 2003, 188-189):

- ◆ We must exegete *and* imagine
- ◆ We must stop blunting the force of the text with trite and moralistic interpretations
- ◆ We must commit to being open to the agency of God and others in coming to the text

L'appel du vide: the call of the void

To this end the French phrase *L'appel du vide* is helpful. It means the Call of the Void. *L'appel du vide* describes the sensation which some experience when standing on the edge of a high cliff or on top of a tall building: the desire to jump.

identifies that the ages of Abraham and Isaac are blanked, as is Isaac's reaction. Especially given there is enough information to assume that someone who is old enough to carry wood for a sacrifice is strong enough to resist being bound by an aged man. Sarah is entirely blanked from the story. Yet, Waltke in identifying blanks (i.e. inconsequential omissions) nevertheless surmises about what might have been. See Waltke 2001, 249, 302 and 308.

One study offered the explanation it is not a suicidal tendency. Surprisingly, the study indicated that instead, “It may be the mind’s convoluted way of appreciating life” (Cara 2016). The study suggested, rather than a death-wish, it is ...

a misinterpretation of a safety or survival signal, with fear playing a huge role. If an individual is more sensitive to these safety signals, then they will be more likely to experience the phenomenon (Mandic 2016).

So – what of the silence, gaps and blanks in the *Akeda* (for example)? *L’appel du vide*: The call of the void. As well-trained exegetes and preachers of the Scriptures we stand aloft at the edge of a high cliff overlooking the depths of Genesis 22. There it lies at our feet far below the void in the story. As a good preacher you think, “I shouldn’t do it. I shouldn’t leap into that void. Stay with what the text clearly states and leave the rest.” But maybe there is something in you that desires to disregard that. Maybe you hear the call of the void. However, you are sensitive to the safety signals as represented by all the good exegetical training you have had, and the rules of Biblical interpretation you have learnt if not taught. But now – in a convoluted way *L’appel du vide* – is calling you to jump. The aforementioned study on this is entitled ‘*An urge to jump affirms the urge to live*’. The risk is amplified and as such life is amplified. But it is risky and we acknowledge that. Hence the French phrase, the call of the void.

So, what does it look like when a preacher jumps? Wiesel shows us with his use of the Midrash in engaging with the *Akeda*. His usage of the *Midrash* provides opportunity for preachers to inhabit the void with illustrations, imagination, and deeply honest spiritual reflection. All which can help listeners see themselves in the story, with God.

Christian writer Judith Kunst provides a helpful description of what the void looks like (Kunst 2006, 29-30) and the struggle that Christians can instinctively experience in such an exercise:

These ‘hidden spaces’ of scripture open up whenever we encounter pronouncements that trouble us, details that refuse to fall into our sense of a logical pattern, or language that sparks a question in us, often mundane, sometimes profound, sometimes desperate. In my own experience, the Bible is full of language that pulls me up short, makes me cringe or simply strikes me dumb with confusion. But whereas Midrash calls the reader to stare straight into the dark holes of scripture, and to use curiosity and questions to dig even deeper into those holes, my own tradition’s way of reading has often seemed to do just the opposite.

Perhaps, when we consider three main approaches of *Midrash* it may not appear quite so death-defying (or fatal) after all (Neusner 2014, 7-10):

1. *Midrash as paraphrase*

... where fresh meaning is given to the text by additional words and phrases.

2. *Midrash as prophecy*

... where a text is identified with a contemporary or future event. There is a clear boundary between text and meaning.

3. *Midrash as parable*

... where a text is mined and the principle that “things are never what they seem to be” is advanced. A deeper meaning in Scripture is sought beyond the plain reading. Again, there is a clear boundary between text and meaning.

Responding to the call: leaping into the void

Eugene Peterson heard Wiesel speak on one memorable day. Peterson reflects ...

Several times during the lecture Wiesel used the word *Midrash*: ‘If we are realistic persons, honest persons, alert persons, then *Midrash* will enter our lives.’ The word means ‘seeking out.’ *Midrash* is the activity of a person who seeks the meaning of the word of God. *Midrash* comprises the stories told and comments made by the persons who seek God’s truth in Scripture (Peterson 2007, 159).

In wrestling with the *Akeda* Wiesel both demonstrates the use of the *Midrash* and how he jumps into the void: offering himself to the story and the God who crafted it. Wiesel shows us the contours of the void. He shows us what it might be like to land there. Several examples will suffice

And the miracle took place. Death was defeated, the tragedy averted. The blade that could have cut the line – and prevented Israel from being born – was halted, suspended. Was the mystery resolved? Hardly. As one plunges into *Midrashic* literature, one feels its poignancy. It leaves one troubled. The question is no longer whether Isaac was saved but whether the miracle could happen again. And how often. And for what reasons. And at what cost (Wiesel 1976, 73).

The *Midrash*, in this case [i.e. why in Genesis 22:19 only Abraham is recorded as returning to the servants], does not limit itself to stating the facts and commenting upon them. It delves into the very heart and silence of the cast of characters. It examines them from every angle; it follows them into their innermost selves; it goes so far as to imagine the unimaginable (Wiesel 1976, 83).

Why did an angel intervene rather than God Himself? The *Midrash* answers: God alone may order death, but to save a human life, an angel is enough (Wiesel 1976, 90).

A profoundly generous and beautiful explanation, but I have another which I prefer. Mine allows me to do what until now I could not; namely, to identify not only with Isaac but also with Abraham. The time has come for the storyteller to confess that he has always felt much closer to Isaac than to his father, Abraham. Then, Wiesel begins to engage with Abraham’s role in the *Akeda* and begins to outline the victories of Abraham over God. Wiesel arrives at a conclusion and a beginning.

We now begin to understand why Abraham’s name has become synonymous with *hesed*. For indeed he was charitable, not so much with Isaac as with God. He could have accused Him and proved Him wrong; he didn’t. By saying yes – almost to the end – he established his faith in God and His mercy, thus bringing Him closer to His creation. He won and – so says the *Midrash* - God loves to be defeated by His children (Wiesel 1976, 93)

But unlike God, Satan hates to lose. Unlike God, he takes revenge, however and against whomever he can. Perhaps one of the most striking Christian examples of leaping into the void is Søren Kierkegaard’s

treatment of *Akeda*. Kierkegaard fills the gap of what might have happened at the moment of the attempted sacrifice (Kierkegaard 1939, 6):

For a moment Abraham turned his face away from his son and when Isaac saw his face again, it had changed, his eyes were wild and he was terrible to look upon. He seized Isaac by the shoulders and threw him to the ground and said, 'Foolish youth, do you believe that I am your father? I am an idol-worshipper. Do you believe it is God's command? No, it is my own pleasure!' Then Isaac trembled and cried out in terror, 'God in Heaven, have mercy on me! God of Abraham have mercy on me! I have no father on earth, be thou my father! And Abraham said softly to himself. 'Father in Heaven, I thank thee. It is better that he should believe me inhuman than he should lose his faith in thee.

Sounds from the Void

This void is not akin to Genesis 1:2: formless and void. I like how a colleague and friend describes it. He is a minister, musician and songwriter. He says in cathedrals the acoustics are such that dissonant sounds are caught and lost in small gaps in the far reaches of the vast spaces. They are there for that purpose. But the dominant spaces enhance and amplify the consonant sounds: which is why you do not hear out-of-tune singing and music in cathedrals (apparently!). So, it is with the void we leap into. We do so in the knowledge that there *is* a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us: great traditions that keep us honest, safe, humble . . . and fearless. We do so with Immanuel who promised to send a Counsellor and not leave us as orphans.

Finding Voice in the Void

Let us 'be real': when in that void we are not likely to forget basic rules of engagement when dealing with Biblical interpretation. Old habits die hard – which is not always a bad thing. Steven D. Mathewson posits three questions to tune the preachers voice to preach prophetically from OT narratives. In one sense, his questions are nothing new, but they still can help us find voice from within the depths of the void of an OT narrative (Mathewson 2014):

- i. What theological message does this story communicate?
- ii. How does this story connect with the Bible's larger story?
- iii. What admonition or exhortation does this story offer?

In presenting a way for interns to preach OT narrative I have relied on a variety of publications (Kent, Kissling and Turner 2010, Wright 2006, Wright 2015, Fee and Douglas 2003). and from these have created the acronym: SHAPE

SHAPE describes the common features of the plot in OT narratives:

- **Start of the story** = what is happening at the start of the story?
- **Help is needed** = what is the problem?
- **Action takes place** = what happens because of the problem?
- **Problem solved** = what finally helps?

- End of the story = how does the story end?

Not all OT narratives have all five parts, but nearly all have three:

- Start of the story
- Help is needed
- Problem solved

SHAPE helps us strike consonant sounds in the void as we study and preach OT narrative.

I encourage interns to let the story tell its story: to not de-story it. Laurence A. Turner advises allowing the plot to guide the sermon and in doing so, “This would produce two ‘stories’ presented in parallel: the biblical story and the worshippers’ story. Thus the biblical narrative is not simply one heard by the congregation, but one in which they participate” (Turner 2010, 21).

Where the ending of the story is well known, the preacher ought to consider starting at Problem Solved and flash-back to earlier parts⁵ to gain new understanding. Alternatively, to work at understanding the heart of how and why the problem was solved. This may well produce the main proposition of the sermon.

It is in such a space and discipline that we may find ourselves in a *Midrashic* void discovering new meaning. Earlier, *Midrash* as parable was described as engaging with the text based on the principle that “things are never what they seem to be.” Laurence A. Turner, using the *Akeda* as an example, complements this *Midrash* approach.

Turner proposes the strategy of reading a narrative as if for the first time in order to maintain the element of surprise. He notes that many commentators make the point that what follows in Genesis 22 is “only a test”: but it is not for the first-time reader! Yet, we also can glean much as second-time readers. Knowing how it ends empowers us to revisit earlier elements of the plot: appreciating their place and poignancy. “Such a second-time reading complements a first-time reading by reconsidering the interrelationships between plot elements and demonstrating a truism of Old Testament narratives: they are always more complex than a first-time reading suggests” (Turner 2010, 19). Second-time readings can revisit the “Start of the story” and “Action taken” with fresh eyes especially. The movie, *Sixth Sense* (1999), is an example of this dynamic. Not until the end of the movie does the viewer realise that one of the two main characters has been dead for nearly the whole movie. The viewer is forced to review the whole movie and reflect on all the conversations and interactions with the new knowledge that this character was invisible and silent to everyone but one other character: a small boy who could see and hear dead people.

⁵ Start of the story; Help is needed; Action takes place

With Elie Wiesel as a role-model exegete (who, remember, takes issue with the Christian interpretation of the *Akeda*), helps me Christologically. Because Elie Wiesel keeps pace with the story, and deeply so, he slows me down. He keeps me in the story and in the darkness. Instead of rushing to a Christological interpretation which runs the risk of being superficial or premature (e.g. Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice is prefiguring Jesus carrying the Cross to Golgotha); I find that Wiesel's slows me down so I find myself wrestling in Gethsemane before rushing to Golgotha. I find that he slows me down so I find myself wrestling with the call before rushing to the crucifixion. I find that he slows me down so I encounter Emmanuel. I find that he slows me down so I celebrate life even as the story does lead from Gethsemane to Golgotha; from call to crucifixion.

Hearing the voice in the void

The proposal here can be summed up in two telling quotations. The first concerns the call to continue to wander and ponder in the space created in the narrative of the *Akeda*

Christian faith creates a presumption that in Scripture in general, and in Gen 22 in particular, there is truth. This presumption, however, should lead not to any kind of complacency ("we have the answers") or superiority toward others ("we're right, you're wrong") but rather to a willingness on the part of the community and individual alike to expose oneself to what the truth, and right worship, of God actually entails: a rigorous, searching, critical, purifying process in which what one holds most dear and God-given may be precisely that which must in some sense be relinquished if faith is to be genuine – and in accordance with the pattern of father Abraham (Moberly 2003, 197).

The second quote need to be from Elie Wiesel. In October 2018, I fulfilled a life-long pilgrimage out of respect. I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. The morning we were to travel there was a cold, still, mist-laden and brooding day. Very apt. But before we left, I sat on the motel bed genuinely afraid about the day ahead. I was scared of what spirit, or what dark spirituality may be waiting at that hellish place. Then, somehow and unexpectedly I found in my possession the final words of Elie Wiesel's chapter on the *Akeda*. It read as follows:

Let us return to the question we asked at the beginning: Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter? Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter. Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And, in spite of everything, he did laugh. (Wiesel 1976, 97),

I left for that pilgrimage faith-full and there that day I truly encountered God. I encountered the voice and Spirit of Christ. I experienced that as I viewed falling autumn leaves with the backdrop of a guard tower and barbed wire fences disappearing from view into the fog. The leaves spoke of death and resurrection; the guard tower and barbed wire of evil.

As I took in that scene, the words from Revelation crashed defiantly into my soul:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15).

To respond to the call of the void in Scripture is to empower us to navigate the voids in this world, and to discover the presence of Christ in it all.

About the Author

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