

Disrupting Time and Hermeneutical Position for Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible: Response to David Schnasa Jacobsen

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This essay names with great clarity a problem that has long troubled Christian preaching of the Hebrew Bible: how we are to understand our relationship to pre-Christian scriptures. Interestingly, David Stark's article, "New Approaches for Old Testament Preaching" was cited in at least two written pieces from this research consultation on Christian preaching of the Old Testament to help name the problem.¹ In his article, Stark describes an observable trend among his preaching students when preaching from Old Testament texts. Either the students rely almost exclusively on historical analysis of the text, or they lean heavily into a christological interpretation of the text. Stark's description of the hermeneutical crisis as a "nineteenth-century historical-christological binary" helps to name the present difficulty of relating to Old Testament texts as those who profess belief in Christ. Stark offers possible trajectories for preaching that complicates the binary, but he does not address the issue of temporality, or narrative time, that Jacobsen has named in this essay.

The issue of narrative time finds its most poignant articulation in the third section of the essay: "The canon offers no sweeping, finished narrative but embodies in various ways the remaining trauma of [. . .] "exile and return." It leaves us not with sweeping narratives in a single direction, but a haunting, unfinished narrative-theological task in Christian preaching of the Hebrew Bible—an unintegrated experience from a time of reframing of Jewish identity after the Temple's destruction."² In a sense, in addition to narrative time, this essay addresses location—namely, the social, temporal, theological location of the preacher. How should the preacher understand her temporal location in relation to the biblical canon? Further, how does one's relation to the biblical text materialize in hermeneutical methods, informing one's

¹ David Stark, "New Approaches for Old Testament Preaching" *Homiletic* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2018)

² This quote can be found in the final paragraph of the section titled "History and Memory: Trauma, the Canon, and Reframing Identity" in David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Exile and Return: Trauma and the Unfinished Theological Task of Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible".

avowed identity in relation to Christ? The hermeneutical issue quickly becomes theological. The posture of the preacher (that is, the preacher's way of relating to the Hebrew Bible) gives rise to theological formation in preaching. Jacobsen takes a more incisive turn when he asks how one's perception of Jesus shapes one's location relative to the biblical text. These are questions that can barely be broached in such a brief essay, but as Jacobsen notes, trauma studies offer a mighty assist.

In an interdisciplinary move, Jacobsen chose to engage theoretical trauma studies. For the uninitiated, trauma studies can be broadly organized into two camps: theoretical and clinical. Clinical trauma studies tend closer to the pathology of trauma, its bodily manifestations, and possible treatments.³ Theoretical trauma studies draw upon insights from clinical studies, while exploring trauma as a phenomenon marking history, literature, media, social representation, politics, and theology.⁴ As David Carr describes in his text, *Holy Resilience*, the biblical canon is largely shaped by trauma.⁵ The phenomenon runs deeper than the flashes of lament and protest that we see in exilic and post-exilic literature. Trauma haunts the redactors' hands, trauma unsettles the theology of the pre-exilic community, trauma bends and breaks social affiliations, and moves religious boundary markers all over the biblical canon. Thus, while we can speak of pre-exile and post-exile, trauma pervades the entirety of the canon—and certainly permeates millennia of interpretation. With this in mind, how might the imprints of trauma on the Hebrew Bible impact the way we come to understand time and narration in relation to the theological claims of scripture? Further, how might that trauma transform our own disposition to the text?

To demonstrate the issue of narrative time in relation to Christian hermeneutics, Jacobsen applies a trauma-informed hermeneutic to the text of Jeremiah 31:31–34.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

³ For example, *Bessel van der Kolk*, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, New York 2014.

⁴ For example, Jacobsen cites the work of Cathy Caruth, a literary scholar who engages psychoanalysis in her work at the intersections of trauma and literature. *Cathy Caruth*, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 20th Anniversary Edition, Baltimore 2016.

⁵ Carr is a biblical scholar who brings theoretical trauma studies to bear on history. *David Carr*, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, New Haven 2014.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Observing supersessionist tendencies in Christian preaching of this text, Jacobsen warns against the erasure and obviation of Jewish people. Drawing on insights from trauma theory, he reassesses time in relation to the text to combat supersessionist readings, offering a less socially and theologically damaging interpretation. He describes the traumatic disorientation of time by employing the metaphor of “exile and return.” He writes, “In this way, exile and return are not merely a sweeping linear narrative, but a returning to the *site* of trauma.”⁶ Though this claim requires some clarification, the metaphor functions appropriately to disrupt the reader’s proclivity for narrative time. This disruption is key to the blurring of the historical-christological binary, as it forces us to surrender our hermeneutical pitfalls: reading the Hebrew Bible as a “preview of coming Christological attractions” as Jacobsen describes it.⁷

In his transition to address the other side of the historical-christological binary, Jacobsen names how the traumatic rupture of time might reshape one’s christological imagination. The disruption of one’s temporal location in relation to the Hebrew Bible has implications for one’s social location relative to Jesus. In this section, it seems Jacobsen’s primary concern is for how Christians relate to Jesus’s Jewish identity. Quoting J. Kameron Carter’s *Race: A Theological Account*, he describes how the erasure of Jesus’s Jewishness gives rise to white supremacy. Thus, to resist the impulses of white supremacy the Jewishness of Jesus must fundamentally be preserved, establishing a dislocation of the Christian reader. The religious and ethnic otherness of Jesus “addresses us across relational difference”,⁸ bringing us into a proper hermeneutical relationship with both Christ and the scriptures of Jesus’s Jewish heritage. But the relational difference must be fundamentally acknowledged, as Jacobsen makes clear in this essay. We cannot interpret these texts responsibly or justly without being, ourselves, dislocated.

⁶ See the second paragraph of the section titled “A Critical Example in Christian Homiletical Practice: Jeremiah 31:31–34” in *Jacobsen*, “Exile and Return: Trauma and the Unfinished Theological Task of Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible”.

⁷ See the fourth paragraph of the section titled, “A Critical Example in Christian Homiletical Practice: Jeremiah 31:31–34” in *Jacobsen*, “Exile and Return: Trauma and the Unfinished Theological Task of Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible”.

⁸ See the section titled, “Beyond the Knotted Binary” in *Jacobsen*, “Exile and Return: Trauma and the Unfinished Theological Task of Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible”.

Out of these important insights on trauma and one's relational proximity to Christ in relation to the Hebrew Bible, a few questions emerge. The first concerns the traumatic contours of biblical interpretation and Christian history. Echoing the work of David Carr, Jacobsen writes about the traumatic origins of the Hebrew Bible. He names well the significance of exilic trauma for how we understand the biblical canon. But how might trauma studies also inform our own appropriations of those texts? How do the wounds remain and live on at the edges of our theological discourse? How might the shame produced by one's anti-Semitism and racism manifest in a penchant for making Jesus white and non-Jewish?⁹ How have the traumas particular to *Christian* history complicated our current locations relative to the Hebrew Bible? I suspect that the hidden hand of traumas unknown tug at our hermeneutical postures far more than we know. I don't suppose one author can or should account for every lingering ghost of our religion in one brief essay. But I do wonder where texts end and bodies begin, where the traumas of the Hebrew Bible end, and the traumas of Christian history begin, where the social-identity crises of post-exilic Israel end, and our own misidentifications of Jesus begin. Perhaps in the blurring of narrative time, there is also a blurring of relations, making it difficult to be self-reflexive when trying to establish healthy hermeneutical postures, locations, and boundaries with the biblical texts.

A second question that emerges is, how capable are we of "holding our identity in abeyance or suspension" as Jacobsen prescribes in the final section of his paper?¹⁰ As we acknowledge the Jewishness of Jesus and the "otherness" of the Hebrew Bible in our preaching, is it possible for us to wholly suspend our own identities? Is it helpful? This is the central issue taken up in my own article in this series, where I argue that Christians cannot fully suspend their own identities in relation to the Old Testament, but instead need to become more aware of their own position in relation to the Old Testament. There may be some form of suspension of the self before the text, but only insofar as the interpreter can identify their own hermeneutical horizon. Arguably, Christian readers are not fully aware of the ways in which our traditions and the commitments of our faith skew our reading of the Hebrew Bible. Those subterranean inclinations—the nearly undetectable formation of Christian imagination over time—do impact how we relate to pre-Christian scriptures.

Thus, on the one hand, there ought to be a dislocating of Christians in relation to the Hebrew Bible. We ought to recognize the complexity of social identity relative to the Hebrew Bible, and we most certainly need to affirm Jesus's Jewish identity. At the same time, I wonder

⁹ Many trauma scholars are exploring the phenomena of shame and moral injury in relation to trauma to better understand how the phenomena can produce socially damaging behaviors and ideologies.

¹⁰ See the section titled, "Beyond the Knotted Binary" in *Jacobsen*, "Exile and Return: Trauma and the Unfinished Theological Task of Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible".

what it means for Christ to address us across relational difference as we receive the Hebrew Bible as being also for us, a part of our own faith heritage. Is it possible to not just be dislocated or suspended, but named and identified in new ways by this *other* Christ, this *other* God who has self-revealed throughout time and across cultures?

This brings me to my third question. In Jacobsen's second recommendation for a revised christology, he argues for a theocentric approach, via a "theocentric Christ."¹¹ Certainly a theocentric approach might absolve some of the tensions experienced by those who profess belief in Christ but wish to honor the integrity of pre-Christian scriptures. But why not opt for a trinitarian approach? In a trinitarian approach, the God of the Old Testament is affirmed as the God we have come to know as three-in-one, thus alleviating the anxious compulsion to name Christ in every sermon. Further, a trinitarian approach addresses pneumatological possibilities: perhaps Spirit might bridge some of the fissures of relation. Spirit is transgressive and transformational, meeting us in the gaps of social relation and inviting us to be transformed in the presence of others. Theologian and trauma scholar Shelly Rambo has proposed trauma-informed reconsiderations of Christian narrative time in relation to scripture by way of a theology of the Spirit in her book, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*.¹² Perhaps Rambo's pneumatology could provide Jacobsen with an additional lens for exploring identity formation in relation to scripture.

Ultimately, I affirm Jacobsen's claim that a heavily christo-centric approach can be problematic. A christo-centric tendency—especially among preachers who erase Jesus's Jewishness—denies the disruption and dislocation of engaging pre-Christian scriptures. But emphasizing the necessity of dislocation and disruption without inviting an accompanying transformation might just leave readers stranded at another hermeneutical impasse: wondering how to cross the divide of social difference, wondering how to relate to others both human and divine, and wondering how the Hebrew Bible might speak to Christians today.

Jacobsen's essay effectively loosens the historical-christological binary with his claim that unidirectional narrative time distorts the witness of the Hebrew Bible and obfuscates the social identity of Jesus. But perhaps the most important element of Jacobsen's essay is his attention to the deep connections between canon and identity, and historical social formation and present social relations. These are complex networks of relation that Jacobsen teases out for closer examination, opening avenues for deeper explorations on the subject.

¹¹ See numeral 2 in the section titled, "Beyond the Knotted Binary" in *Jacobsen*, "Exile and Return: Trauma and the Unfinished Theological Task of Christian Preaching of the Hebrew Bible".

¹² *Shelly Rambo*, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, Louisville 2010.

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