

Job's Testimony and Homiletical Renewal: A Response to Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby

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1. Introduction

Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby's excellent paper on christological commitments in preaching on Job 19:25 underscores the situatedness of all Christian homiletical reflection on the Hebrew Scriptures. McLaughlin-Sheasby illuminates well what has been at stake for some preachers who have sought to confirm the messiahship of Jesus via an ancient Israelite text the composition of which predated Christ's Incarnation by centuries. McLaughlin-Sheasby's piece is wonderfully generative, and her incisive analysis is important for all who are energized by the 2021 Academy of Homiletics theme of a preaching renaissance. In this response, I explore two queries. First, on what authority can preachers offer their proclamation in this postmodern age? Second, to what must Christian preachers attend in order to ensure that their preaching does no harm?

2. The Text Itself: Polyphonous and Undecidable

McLaughlin-Sheasby urges that preachers be critically reflective about their Christian commitments and honest about ways in which their texts may promote different or other claims.¹ She is certainly correct. Every preacher should commit to critical interrogation of their biases and a searching candor regarding biblical texts' divergent cultural contexts, unfamiliar discursive practices, and differing theological, ritual, and ethical norms. The preacher who offers a message rooted in Scripture must make that message intelligible to contemporary hearers, to be sure. Some retranslation of biblical theologies and refiguring of biblical discourses is inevitable, and a key homiletical goal assuredly is to perform such retranslation and refiguring in artisanal ways that are faithful and compelling to listeners. Yet even so, preachers should strive to honor the Otherness of the biblical text as much as is feasible and

¹ I especially appreciate the metaphor for nuanced and sensitive interpretation McLaughlin-Sheasby draws from the arena of textile art: negotiating the ancient historical context and its significances for a contemporary preaching moment is like "pulling through [a] shared thread between worlds."

fruitful. Lively critical reflection should be undertaken in the preacher's well-planned study of Scripture and reception history, rather than only fleetingly in frantic sermon preparation as the time of worship approaches. Though the preacher will not be narrating the results of their study from the pulpit, the formative power of dedicated study will be recognizable in the preacher's deepened spiritual wisdom and demeanor of delight in encounters with the sacred text. Here, McLaughlin-Sheasby lauds historical-critical tools and methods as invaluable for understanding "the horizon of the text itself."

Ah, the text itself! I leap to frame a question rooted in literary criticism of biblical narratives and poetry. In biblical scholarship and congregational teaching, I have found it enormously productive to explore subversive ironies in prophetic discourse, ambiguities in the characterization of figures such as Rahab, Naomi, and Qohelet, and dramatic reversals that unfold in narratives such as the Joseph material in Genesis 37–50 and the book of Esther. I am fascinated by multivalent metaphors and strategic gapping in Biblical Hebrew narratives and poetry. I find it essential to resist premature or overly constricted closure of meaning when the biblical text is much more artful than a thematic focus or simple summary might allow. While some biblical texts may be simple enough, many are beautifully complex and intertextually laden, and some are truly undecidable on one or another issue. McLaughlin-Sheasby speaks, reasonably, of "the historical moorings of the text." But much more is up for debate than preachers may realize. What do we do when something urgently important is not, in fact, moored—not attached to anything set in stone? If the text itself is fluid or undecidable, to what, then, is the preacher moored?

Textual polyvalence is not a merely theoretical potentiality that can be solved, with options to be sifted, mastered, and dispatched by the stentorian pronouncements of the biblical commentators whose work preachers consult tactically, often with anxiety or a tedious sense of obligation, while preparing sermons. The astonishing sophistication of biblical texts has been clear to scholarly interpreters—Jewish, Christian, and other—for many centuries, and it has been glimpsed by seminary-trained preachers ever since influential works by Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg were published in 1985.² McLaughlin-Sheasby would assent to the presence of exquisite nuances of biblical expression from her vantage point within the intricacies of Joban discourse. During sermon preparation, it is vital that preachers pause to reflect on what may be at stake in different trajectories of possibility and remain open to the play of meanings and counter-meanings. Polyvalence is not a chimera made up by

² See *Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York 2011; *Meir Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Bloomington, IN 1987. The wave of literary-critical studies on biblical books and focal texts is vast; of notable interest to literary critics have been the books of Genesis, Ruth, Esther, and Jonah.

Western literary theorists in the 1960s and 1970s. It is a dynamic feature of the Word of the living God! The proliferation of captivating possibilities, lacunae whose depths are unsearchable, interpretive knots that cannot be untangled: these have been formed in the crucible of undecidable and holy originary signifying. Traditional historical-critical scholarly commentaries are supersaturated with information and background data, but all too often, their authors flail in the face of textual tensions and aporia, or hurry to resolve them prematurely. Feminist and postcolonial commentaries strive to navigate among textual and interpretive tensions in productive ways, but many of these works are not widely known in circles in which preachers move.³

My first question is this: given the marvelous complexity and undecidability of some biblical texts, on what grounds can a preacher offer a proclamatory claim with authority? The preacher, inspired and challenged by the Holy Spirit and steeped in continual prayerful study of the Scriptures, can mine the best insights of interpretive traditions, not neglecting the salutary moments of dissent that enliven religious discourse and shed new light. Yes: the preacher does dare to speak. But historical-critical consensus should not be taken as the final arbiter of the viability of an interpretive move or sermon message. Flowing from the depths to the shallows of Western historical-critical biblical scholarship are streams of bias and naiveté that erode right understanding. Poorly theorized assumptions are rife in historical-critical circles as regards literary texts and how they signify; tautologies abound in scholarly proposals concerning the composition and redaction of biblical texts. Superb analysis has been done as regards how gender and power operated in ancient social contexts, but broad arenas within traditional theological education still pay little heed to the fruits of research on gender. These streams of bias and naiveté meet in the massive tide of White cishetero-patriarchal prejudice that regularly sweeps over the ground on which stand our more radical and prophetic interpreters: feminist, womanist, and queer scholars and preachers, liberation theologians and others those who openly challenge the brutality of late industrial and finance capitalism. Lisa Thompson rightly urges that preachers recognize and examine “our historical inclinations to read Scripture in ways that align with power.”⁴ HyeRan Kim-Cragg underscores the “critical role of homiletical hermeneutics” in declining the rigid constraints of biblical literalism and the monologic and colonizing pretensions of faux-objective historical-

³ I commend to preachers the feminist Wisdom commentary series published by Liturgical Press under the leadership of Barbara E. Reid, OP, General Editor.

⁴ Lisa L. Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines: Possibilities and Pitfalls*, Minneapolis, MN 2021, 22.

critical discourse.⁵ Sarah Travis calls preachers and theologians to cultural humility, “defined as a lifelong process of self-reflection, self-critique, continual assessment of power imbalances, and the development of mutually respectful relationships and partnerships,” from the ethical position that “the other always exceeds our capacity to know and master.”⁶ And Jerusha Neal beckons us into “a global homiletic conversation.... because without it, even the best attempts to balance the scale of homiletic privilege will prioritize Western practices and forms,”⁷ even in communities and traditions where postcolonial awareness has been emerging for some time.

The shifting tides and elusive eddies of biblical signifying pull us toward the One who breathed those traditions into being. The irresolvable and holy differences that constitute every human community—and the entire biotic community of Earth—may be cherished as a site of continual incarnation. Homiletical authority may be claimed precisely here, in these dynamics of text and beloved community. Seeking to love God through immersive study of the marvelous polyphony of sacred texts, seeking to love neighbor through attention to every yearning and cry and struggle in lived experience: these constitute the grounds on which the Christian preacher can offer a Gospel proclamation with authority in the postmodern age. Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 can serve as guiding lights for Christians preaching on the Hebrew Scriptures. The Great Commandments map a cartography of shared terrain across which Jewish and Christian preachers can journey together, each bringing forth fruit from God’s holy Word to share on the journey.

3. Reception History: Gorgeously Wrought and Dangerous

McLaughlin-Sheasby situates Christian preaching on Job 19:25–27 in the history of homiletical reception, underlining the truth that “the text was never unmediated.” Job’s *cri de cœur*, “I know that my Redeemer lives,” was encountered by literate believers through theological annotations in the margins of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, and by a wider public through stained glass, paintings, sculpture, and other visual arts, sacred music, and catechetical materials, including homilies. This wealth of responses demonstrates, in the apt phrase of McLaughlin-Sheasby, the “continued reverberations of inexhaustible texts” down through the centuries. Jerome,

⁵ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Preaching in a Post-Truth Era,” in: *International Journal of Homiletics* 4 (2020): 88–102, esp. 90–94. On uninterrogated Whiteness and ableism in normative constructions of pulpit authority, see Kim-Cragg, “Probing the Pulpit: Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives,” in: *Liturgy* 34/2 (2019): 22–30.

⁶ Sarah Travis, “In the Room Where It Happens: Cultural Humility, Curiosity, and Wonder in the Homiletics Classroom,” in: *Homiletic* 46/2 (2021): 31–40 (33).

⁷ Jerusha Matsen Neal, “Boundaries of Belonging: The Necessity of a Global Homiletic Conversation,” in: *Homiletic* 43/1 (2018): 3–17 (6).

Gregory the Great, Reformation commentaries: all have influenced the Church's understanding of the *gō'ēl*, the redeemer, in Job 19:25. But how was the Hebrew term to be understood? As a human vindicator? Many scholars say yes, quite certain that divinity is not in view. "*Redeemer* ... should not be capitalized," David Clines writes, "since the champion is not God (God is [Job's] enemy). The only champion Job has is his own innocence."⁸ Yet others have been just as adamant that the redeemer must be understood as God, or as an angelic advocate, or as a prefiguring of Christ.⁹

Here, McLaughlin-Sheasby trains a spotlight on a brilliant sermon on Job 19 by Gardner Taylor, a homiletical performance of christological commitment by a preacher who has listened deeply to Job. Taylor is a genius of expository preaching, and this sermon is an instructive exemplar. I agree with her assessment that preachers may call on Christ as our hope from our own places of brokenness and despair, as Taylor does so deftly, without imposing Christian theology on the Hebrew text. Taylor works with a powerful refrain about the sufferer's window on life narrowing to a slit, a keen insight that should make this sermon required reading for pastoral-care providers. He expounds the magnitude of Job's desolation in a way that underscores the existential need of all of us for community. Truly inspired is his catena of illustrations of the traumas endured by famous contemporary preachers. Taylor performs all this in a way that does not silence Job in his Otherness, does not speak over him, but amplifies his voice. McLaughlin-Sheasby observes, beautifully, "Taylor refuses to turn his back on Job. It is as if he has heard Job's cry for someone to advocate for him, and stepped up to the task."

But Taylor's earnest reading of "I know that my Redeemer lives" is not the only way a preacher might proceed with this text. Leong Seow contends that Job is calling the deity ironically to account: God should be acting as Job's redeemer. Seow writes, "there has been no letup in [Job's] polemics against God. Indeed, whenever he appears to speak positively of God, his words are heavy with irony and sarcasm (7:17–21; 9:4–10; 12:7–25; 13:14–16)."¹⁰ I discern irony too, but along a different trajectory than that traced by Seow. Beginning with verse 21, Job is confronting his interlocutors, who have been saying in elaborate ways that Job's sin has caused his suffering. The implied audience of the story knows the charge is false—we have been told by the narrator that Job is blameless. Some interpreters have wondered whether Job had sinned in being hyper-scrupulous in his ethical and ritual observations. But it is not clear that the narrator means to suggest Job is guilty of pride on this point. Intradiegetically, hyper-

⁸ David J. A. Clines, commenting on Job 19:25 in the New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, Oxford 2010, 745.

⁹ For an eloquent treatment of the options, see Samuel E. Balentine, *Job*, Macon, GA 2006, 296–307.

¹⁰ See C. L. Seow, *Job* 1–21, Grand Rapids, MI 2013, 802–808 (quotation at 804). 823–824.

scrupulosity is not among the interlocutors' charges against their suffering friend; neither does the deity allude to that possibility. No—I submit that in verse 25, Job is snarling that he is well aware his Redeemer lives. His heart faints (v. 27c) precisely because he does understand the terrifying weight of that truth. His friends are the ones who fail to see that a Divine Judge is observing them and will hold them accountable for their false imputations of sin and arrogance to Job. They are the ones who should fear (v. 29), because God's wrath awaits them in the final judgment.¹¹

Is Job's cry earnest and to be emulated by believers, as the magnificent sermon of Gardner Taylor would have it? I cheerfully affirm the possibility, which represents the consensus view in the history of interpretation of this passage. Yet it is also possible that Job's cry is ironic, calling God to account, per Seow, or warning Job's interlocutors to stop speaking their nonsense—my view, congruent with the perspective of the Almighty expressed in Job 42:7. The polyvalence of the utterance is real and may itself be taken as meaningful.¹² The adept preacher on Job 19 may be a creative tactician, prayerfully choosing to highlight one dimension of Job's utterance for the needs of a particular contextual moment, and lifting up another aspect for another group of hearers or a different time, guided in each decision by the Holy Spirit.¹³

Christian reception history is fascinating and rich. Instructive exemplars abound—but so do misreadings. To those who construct a narrow hermeneutical rubric based on the “rule of faith,” a move that requires aggressive minimizing of countless moments of dissent and ignorance of the perpetual fluidity of consensus, I would respond that reception history can be dangerous. Sanctioned interpretations have proved to be distorted and myopic as regards virulent anti-Semitism, misogyny, erasure of queer voices, and more. Profound readings are on offer in the history of interpretation, but ill-conceived readings tempt the hapless as well. Spirit-guided discernment is always necessary. Discernment is no less needed when the

¹¹ For cues that Job has always feared God and it is the friends who fail to understand the Almighty's power, see Job 6:14; 13:9; 31:23.

¹² Several characters speak truth in the book of Job, but the book is multivocal on a metanarratological level as well, as Carol A. Newsom has argued persuasively in *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, Oxford 2003; see esp. 3–31.259–264. Seow writes, “Whatever Job might have meant, the present form of the book sees his vindication as coming from God [...]. Thus, even if Job had not actually meant God as his vindicator, the theological reading of the faith community through history is [...] a viable one” (809–810). Balentine remarks of the identity of Job's *gō'el*, “The issue is too complex and too confessionally freighted to be resolved by any single interpretive strategy” (note 9, 305).

¹³ On the importance of the Holy Spirit in homiletical theology and praxis, see Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching*, Nashville, TN 2009; Jerusha Matsen Neal, *The Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, the Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation*, Grand Rapids, MI 2020, esp. 53–83.104–118.212–216.

preacher considers historical-critical methodologies and results of textual analysis. Excellent insights have been proffered by biblical scholars, but historical analysis is far from impervious to critique and cannot “solve” the elliptical and ambiguous nature of biblical texts. This is no minor matter of an occasional *crux interpretum* here or there. Philological impossibilities, poetic ellipses, and semantic ambiguities run through the entire book of Hosea, for example—that dramatic and disturbing prophetic text has been misread in diverse and startling ways over the centuries. The speaker Qohelet in Ecclesiastes has been styled as wise beyond all others (as per his own claim) and, conversely, as an unreliable foil whose contradiction-ridden discourse should be declined by the discerning reader.¹⁴

So upon which level of signifying should preachers fix their gaze when preparing a message for the pulpit? How best to navigate contradictory streams of interpretation in homiletically compelling ways, without defaulting to authoritarian pronouncements or blocking potentially fruitful paths of insight? Much is at stake here. Feminist, womanist, postcolonial, and queer interpreters know it is not just interesting but lifegiving to resist narrow hermeneutical norms. For a true preaching renaissance to unfold, preachers must be joyous and relentless in interrogating the androcentric, white-supremacist, colonizing ideological filiations that have deformed large swaths of the Western intellectual tradition embedded in college and seminary curricula. Biases and exclusions have impoverished biblical scholarship, theological discourse, and homiletical norms in many traditions. The homiletical training and ongoing formation of preachers must be undertaken in ways that keep them alert to the noxious harms of supersessionism,¹⁵ white supremacy, gendered erasures, and other gestures of totalizing discourse.

Reading with the Other is essential. Transformation happens in intentional relationship-building with interpreters shaped by social, cultural, and faith contexts different from one’s own, something long recognized in Jewish-Christian dialogue and feminist emancipatory work across lines of difference. A commitment to solidarity with those oppressed or wounded may require regular reading or advocacy work in trauma studies,¹⁶ anti-racism, and gender justice. Preaching conferences and resource-rich libraries of written reflections, sermons,

¹⁴ See Carolyn J. Sharp, “Ironic Representation, Authorial Voice, and Meaning in Qohelet,” in: *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, Bloomington, IN 2009, 196–220, and the literature cited there.

¹⁵ In the commitment to move beyond Christian supersessionism and anti-Judaism, homiletical resources include Marilyn J. Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism*, Minneapolis, MN 2006; Clark M. Williamson/Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting Difficult Texts: Anti-Judaism and Christian Preaching*, Norwich 2012.

¹⁶ See Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma*, Eugene, OR 2018; Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology*, Eugene, OR 2021.

podcasts, and interviews with preachers across many traditions can catalyze homiletical renewal from numerous loci across the nation and internationally.¹⁷ But what is truly indispensable is listening to the testimony of those who suffer. As McLaughlin-Sheasby has shown, the testimony of Job can be extraordinarily effective as a focal site of investigation into the radical ways in which embodied wisdom, lament, and hope might be engaged in Christian homiletical theology. McLaughlin-Sheasby is pursuing these issues in her dissertation, “An Enfleshed Homiletic: Bearing Witness to Bodies in Theological Discourse.” The monograph taking shape from her investigations will be valuable indeed for preachers who wish to consider the intersections of biblical theology, embodiment, and christology.

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¹⁷ Preachers can explore Day1, the Duke University Chapel archives, the Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence at Southern Methodist University, and the Working Preacher ministry of Luther Seminary, among other online sites. Homileticians and preachers may participate in the Academy of Homiletics, the African American Preaching Conference of the George W. Truett Seminary of Baylor University, the Festival of Homiletics sponsored by Luther Seminary, the Homegrown Women’s Preaching Festival of the Resource Center for Women & Ministry in the South, programs of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, the Societas Homiletica, and numerous other initiatives.