Unsettling Christological Readings of the Old Testament: A Response to Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby

David M. Stark
University of the South

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1. Introduction

San Gregorio della Divina Pietà is a church in Rome, Italy that dates back to the high Middle Ages. Tradition suggests that it is the birthplace of Gregory the Great.[1] Throughout its several building phases and remodels, the site functioned largely as a parish church. During a restoration in 1858, an artist added to the portal of the church a painting of Jesus on the cross. Beneath the painting, written in Hebrew and Latin is Isaiah 65:2–3a. Together the inscription and image present Jesus calling to those who pass by: "I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually." This, I propose, is an icon of the church's tradition of christological reading of the Old Testament. On the one hand, the portal of San Gregorio demonstrates that the words of the Old Testament matter for Christians. Here God's speech to formerly exiled people resettling ancient Judea is extended as Jesus's speech to all who would hear. San Gregorio's portal shows further how Isaiah could be used within the Lenten season. It may even echo the missional proclamation of Gregory to

David Stark, San Gregorio della Divina Pietà, February 17, 2017.

[1] *Carlo Pietrangeli*, Guide rionali di Roma (in Italian). Sant'Angelo, Rome 1976, 14.

pagan Anglo-Saxons in the sixth century. On the other hand, San Gregorio's portal was a site where church leaders compelled Jews in the nearby ghetto to attend Christian sermons every sabbath from 1555 to 1870. When Jews began to put wax in their ears to avoid listening to the sermons, the image of Jesus and the inscription from Isaiah 65 were added to the façade of the church.[2] San Gregorio's portal raises an unsettling insight into the Church's tradition[3] of christological reading. Namely, christological readings of the Old Testament have functioned not only to develop scriptural insights for Christians but to dominate Jews and the interpretations of scripture that Jews and Christians hold in common. So, what is a Christian preacher to do?

In her essay on christological readings of Job, Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby invites readers to wrestle with what today's Church has inherited. She too points to Gregory the Great as the figure who popularized Jerome's christological reading of Job. And, her research shows that Gregory's work offered important insights that connected testaments and theologies, likely increasing Christian engagement with Job through preaching, art, and liturgy. At the same time, not unlike the parish in Rome named in his honor, Gregory's way of reading Job exerts power over the Christian hermeneutical imagination and over people who would read Job in differing ways. McLaughlin-Sheasby rightly unmasks how the christological reading popularized by Gregory continues to dominate pre-Christian meanings of scripture, Jewish hermeneutical insights, research from biblical scholars, and even other Christian interpretations. In all these ways, McLaughlin-Sheasby seeks to unsettle seemingly settled Christian tradition when it comes to interpreting Old Testament texts. In addition to these insights, McLaughlin-Sheasby's essay suggests three further ways that a Christian preacher might respond to the unsettling function of christological traditions. Preachers should seek to expand, unmask, and recontextualize tranditions of reading the Old Testament.

2. Expanding Tradition: Gardner Taylor's Theological Hermeneutic

McLaughlin-Sheasby asserts that we need to learn from preachers within our tradition who have navigated differently the challenges of the Church's dominating way of reading Job. She highlights Gardner Taylor's preaching. Taylor consistently demonstrates a resistance to the domination of minoritized communities. So perhaps it is not surprising that Taylor also faithfully navigates christological and historical traditions in ways that push beyond a simple binary choice.

[2] *Sergio Delli*, Le strade di Roma (in Italian), Rome 1975.

[3] As I will argue later in this essay, there is not one tradition but numerous *traditions* of Christological readings.

Here McLaughlin-Sheasby cites my earlier observation of how certain preachers of the Old Testament seem caught in a binary between historical or christological readings.[4] It is important to note, however, that I made this observation while reflecting on the preaching practice of mostly white students in mainline seminaries in the US and in a theological school in Germany. The implication is not that there *is* a binary in the Church-wide practice of preaching the Old Testament, but rather that whiteness seems to be contributing to a false binary that does not serve the work of preaching good news or of spreading God's kin-dom in the world.

Gardner Taylor, then, is an especially helpful source for confronting this problem. Taylor seems to have given much thought to preaching the Old Testament. For instance, when he gave the Beecher Lectures on preaching, Taylor emphasized the "watchman" image from Ezekiel 33 as *the* metaphor for the preacher.[5] Further, Taylor's preaching appears to regularly offer a different way of handling Christian tradition and Old Testament scriptures. Just to offer one example, in his sermon on the fourth servant song of Isaiah, Taylor deftly navigates historical studies and faith claims. He preaches,

> I do not doubt when the authorities and scholars of the Old Testament tell us that this word was not intended, by the prophet who wrote it, to be a description of Jesus, our Lord. I have no argument with the idea that this passage, this entire chapter, for that matter, refers to the nation of Israel.[6]

Taylor then shifts to present Jesus as one who recognizes that Isaiah was not writing about Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus sees that Isaiah's words can be applied to him just as Isaiah's and Taylor's audiences might also decide to give their life to the servant's way. I mention this example because it suggests that Taylor's approach to historical and christological commitments in Job 19 is part of a pattern of his preaching that we would do well to examine more fully.

Further, Taylor's preaching highlights a theological move within some streams of African American preaching traditions that might helpfully instruct the way some preach the Old Testament. As McLaughlin-Sheasby notes, Taylor does not explicitly name Jesus. Instead, he

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[4] *David Stark*, "New Approaches for Old Testament Preaching", in: Homiletic 43, no. 2 (2018).

[5] "Gardner C. Taylor: Portrait of a Prophet" 104–112, in: Richard Lischer (ed.), The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present, Grand Rapids 2002, 105.

[6] Gadner C. Taylor, The Words of Gardner Taylor. Vol 2. Sermons from the Middle Years: 1970-1980. Edward L. Taylor (ed.), Valley Forge 2000, 39.

allows the Christian imagination of his hearers to engage those connections. Then, Taylor closes his sermon by turning to a proclamation of good news, focusing on theological statements with "God" as the subject. This move echoes a claim Cleo LaRue makes in his book, *The Heart of Black Preaching.* He writes, "Blacks have long believed that it is the Creator God who works mightily in human history to accomplish God's purposes."[7] Here, LaRue is trying to describe a shift in theological focus that centers on a demonstration of God's power as ultimate, as that which "drives, motivates, and gives shape and life to the creation and organization of the black sermon."[8] In fact, with rhetoric that echoes advice often given about christological proclamation, LaRue counsels preachers, "I am not saying that every sermon ought to have the word 'God' in it, but each sermon should concern itself with God's essence and actions."[9]

While I am a bit uncomfortable with LaRue's seemingly monolithic claims about Black preaching, it is important to note that Gardner Taylor *specifically* embodies this theological centering of the first person of the Trinity in his sermon on Job 19. So, the question McLaughlin-Sheasby's paper raises is to what degree should we connect Taylor's theological centering of God with his constructive engagement with historical biblical studies? Are there ways in which centering God, rather than Jesus, can help Christian preachers navigate the challenges of preaching the Old Testament?

That this answer is not already apparent and widely known within the Church suggests that Christians continue to operate with too limited an understanding of traditions of reading scripture. And, this ignorance does not exist because hermeneutical variation is esoteric, rare, or difficult to access. Some other force seems to be at play. Here, it is significant to me that McLaughlin-Sheasby turns to Gardner Taylor *after* an overview of the history of interpretation. I cannot help but see in this move an implicit critique of the way in which many present the Christian tradition of preaching the Old Testament—as if it were one stream of thought populated with a handful of figures, dominated largely by men from Europe and North America.

Instead, McLaughlin-Sheasby calls out for a cloud of witnesses. She shows that liturgical usage matters. Outliers like John Calvin matter.[10] The witness of biblical scholars matter. By

[7] *Cleophus LaRue,* The Heart of Black Preaching, Louisville 2000, 112.

[8] Ibid. 112–113.

[9] Ibid. 115.

[10] For instance, David Steinmetz argues that Calvin's reading of Isaiah 6 shows a hermeneutic that is focused mostly on literal-grammatical interpretation, that reads with a Trinitarian theological center, that engages interpreters from pagan, Islamic, Jewish and Christian experiences, and that works to "soften the hard edges" of

drawing on Gardner Taylor, she demonstrates that Black preaching traditions matter. And, by extension, preaching traditions from the majority world matter. This move calls us to expand our sense of tradition, and to consider: what other preaching traditions and which other figures are vital for helping the Church learn to better proclaim the Old Testament?

3. Unmasking Tradition: Self-Awareness and Positionality

Building on her work with Taylor, McLaughlin-Sheasby calls Christian preachers to practice critical self-awareness. This is a call to recognize not only an individual's but also *a tradition's* privilege, position, and power at work in the world. Here McLaughlin-Sheasby rightly notes that faithful and effective Christian proclamation of the Old Testament begins with examining, unmasking, confronting, and pushing back on our formation and on unexamined elements of Christian traditions of preaching the Old Testament.

Indeed, many Christological readings of the Old Testament are not benign. As David Jacobsen highlights in his essay, J. Cameron Carter draws a clear connection between Western Christianity's white supremacy, an abandonment of the Jewishness of Jesus, and supercessionist readings.[11] Willie Jennings makes a similar claim in *The Christian Imagination.* Here he sees a correlation of the early medieval European abandonment of Israel theology and a rise of concepts of whiteness in service to colonial projects.[12] Annette von Stockhausen observes that this problem may even stretch back to early gentile Christians, who desired to win hermeneutical debates with Jews but may have lacked proficiency in Hebrew. Thus, Christological readings came to function as a powerful tool for dominating arguments and eventually people.[13]

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christological readings (*David Steinmetz*, John Calvin on Isaiah 6: A Problem in the History of Exegesis, in: Interpretation, 36 no 2 Apr 1982, p. 156–170, 167–169. Further, Matthew Boulton's research highlights that Calvin used the study of scripture to confront humanity's sin-blinded perception to the reality of God's presence (*Matthew Myer Boulton*, Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology [Grand Rapids, MI 2011, 95]). Calvin held that as we see God through the Spirit in scripture, the Spirit uses scripture to focus our eyes so that we can recognize God all around us (96).

[11] *David Jacobsen*, "Exile and Return: Trauma and the Unfinished Theological Task" [see in this volume of IJH 1–13], citing *J. Cameron Carter*, Race: A Theological Account, Oxford 2008, 372.

[12] *Willie James Jennings*, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race, New Haven 2010.

[13] She observes that early gentile Christians had a problem. "They relate to the Bible as a holy book—as do the Jews. But unlike them, they have it only in a translation and there were repeated controversies on the right wording of the text. Christians therefore always had a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the Jews" (*Annette von Stockhausen*, Christian Perception of Jewish Preaching in Early Christianity?, in: Alexander Deeg/Walter Homolka/Heinz-Günther Schöttler (eds.), Preaching in Judaism and Christianity, New York 2008, 49–70, 69.

McLaughlin-Sheasby's essay points to the fact that Christian interpreters have not probed enough our traditions of preaching the Old Testament. Rather, too often Christian interpreters treat OT interpretative tradition as something that exists in proscriptive, monolithic, and inflexible ways. For instance, compare the way the tradition of Christian preaching of the Old Testament is treated to the ways Womanist homileticians are handling patriarchal and anti-Black traditions of reading scripture. When Renita Weems recently preached on the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28, she spent a significant portion of her sermon calling out how translators took a word that could mean "woman of power" and made it say "witch."[14] After unmasking the problem with our tradition of translation, she unsettles her listeners by praising "witches" in our lives, and then she proclaims good news by honoring women of prophetic power as a gift of God at work in the world. Given just this example, I wonder how our preaching might look differently if more Christian preachers took time in their sermons to confront problematic elements within christological traditions of Old Testament interpretation, to unmask bias, and to proclaim good news in ways similar to the approach Weems takes in her sermon? Furthermore, what might be revealed in and through our preaching if we took time for critical self-reflection on the ways that positionality—especially with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability status—impacts us and, *specifically*, our tradition(s) of reading the Old Testament? This feels like a simple question, and yet much of Old Testament preaching seems to reveal an avoidance of precisely the kind of self-awareness McLaughlin-Sheasby calls Christian preachers to practice.

Perhaps biblical scholarship can also be helpful here. Of course, this field of study has struggled with its own white, male, North Atlantic bias. Nevertheless, as McLaughlin-Sheasby directs her readers through the exegesis of Job 19, she highlights Job's grotesque preaching body, the chapter's use of persuasion, its intertextual dialogue, its intentionally elusive use of redeemer, and its potential use of irony when proclaiming good news. She also engages scholars whose perspectives are largely neglected in typical surveys of Christian tradition. While noticeably absent are women's voices other than her own, McLaughlin-Sheasby does offer insights from scholars shaped by Peruvian, Singaporean, Jewish, and Australian contexts.[15] Noticeably, these scholars and her own observations lead McLaughlin-Sheasby to read Job in a different light: not as a christological prophesy, nor as remote history, nor even as narration of a shared human experience of suffering, but as a locus for text and reader to voice their shared longing for divine intervention. This move reframes Job 19, and perhaps the

[14] *Renita Weems*, Sermon on the Witch of Endor (Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership), April 10, 2021, https://fb.watch/5as2wEq1dw/ [accessed 01/27/2022].

[15] E.g. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Choon-Leong Seow, Matthew J. Suriano, Aron Pinker, and Norman Habel.

entire book of Job, as a sort of homiletic opportunity for exploring the possibilities and limits of our speech to and about God.[16] Taken together, all of these observations and diverse perspectives helps to unmask our traditions' positionality and might help contribute to undoing some of the harmful, limited, and misguided readings that McLaughlin-Sheasby highlights from within the Church's history.

4. Recontextualizing Traditions of Old Testament Preaching

McLaughlin-Sheasby asks one final question about tradition that is essential to explore in this essay. She writes, "...how does the modern Christian preacher handle an Old Testament text in a manner that both honors the text's pre-Christian meaning *and* maintains the confessions of Christian faith?"[17] This framing raises for me the question as to whether one sermon should, or even can, maintain the confessions of Christian faith? How much work must one sermon do?

To ask this question is not to deny Christian confession but to ponder preaching's context. It invites us to consider how the liturgy affects the preaching moment. Obviously, liturgies are not without their problematic elements when it comes to reading and proclaiming the Old Testament. And yet, I cannot help but think of how the creed and the Eucharist in my tradition proclaim fuller and clearer confessions of Christian faith than most sermons ever could.[18] Beyond these two elements, one can find proclamation of Christian faith in every congregation's liturgy through prayer, hymns, testimony, scriptural reading, and many other elements. Must the sermon carry all of the burden of proclaiming Christian confession? Or, might the liturgy free-up the preacher to focus in on one voice, one confession, one testament that could be added to the cloud of witnesses experienced in every worship service?

Further, this question about maintaining the confessions of Christian faith calls for preachers to reflect upon their theology of preaching. Specifically, what would "maintaining the confessions of Christian faith" *require* a preacher to do? Specific to this essay, must Christian preachers always name Christ in the sermon? Here, Gardner Taylor seems to say, "no." But, then, are christological allusions required? I do not think so. Here, exceptions to the christological "tradition" become helpful exemplars for a range of preaching approaches to the Old Testament. Perhaps it is enough in this essay to point with McLaughlin-Sheasby to

[16] Perhaps this should not be a surprising outcome. After all, the book of Job does begin with a question about Job's speech to God, and it ends with an evaluation of Job's speech about God.

[17] *Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby*, "I Know My Redeemer Lives: A Case of Christological Commitments in Christian Preaching of the Book of Job" [see in this volume of IJH p. 14].

[18] Note, I am ordained in the United Methodist Church and teach in an Episcopal seminary.

Gardner Taylor, though I have also highlighted Renita Weems' exemplary preaching. Notably, Taylor and Weems avoid any construed dichotomy between pre-Christian meaning and confessions of Christian faith. Instead, they treasure other's voices and insights as important for Christians to hear in their own right. In the future we can hope that further research will uncover more and various examples of Christian preaching of the Old Testament that expand tradition's exemplars and open up new possibilities for proclamation today.[19]

Finally, to speak specifically to a theology of preaching Christ, I would argue that if the apostle Paul is correct that those baptized into Jesus, the Jewish messiah and son of God, are grafted into Israel through Christ (Rom 11:17–18), and if Martin Luther is correct that the Spirit works in and around Christian preaching to make Christ present as a preacher,[20] then perhaps we need not worry so much about finding Jesus in a particular text of scripture nor fret over connecting an Old Testament passage to some specific Christian confession in the New Testament or elsewhere. Christians are already connected to the Old Testament through the work of Jesus—not through our work of discovering and naming Jesus in a text. We preach from the Old Testament because Christ has made us, gentiles, a part of God's people. And, at any rate, preachers could never come close to maintaining even one confession of Christian faith by our words alone—if they stand apart from the Living Word who preaches in our midst. I wonder, then, whether part of the problem of Christian preaching of the Old Testament is that the Church's view of the preacher's role remains too high, and our view of Christ's role in preaching remains too low? I wonder how trusting more in the Christian confession of Christ's work, grafting us into God's people and preaching in our midst, could liberate the pulpit from false binaries, construed dichotomies, and dominating hermeneutics?

5. Conclusion

The story about San Gregorio's portal with which I opened this essay shows preachers that christological readings of the Old Testament can be as insightful as they are dominating. This story also illustrates that it matters what we communicate about our traditions. While I do not know what the parish of San Gregorio says about itself, it is striking that the Italian tour guides

[19] I attempted this work with preachers from the last two decades in my article, "New Approaches for Old Testament Preaching," in: Homiletic Vol. 43, No. 2 (2018): 13–24.

[20] For a visual interpretation of this theology, see Lucas Cranach, the Younger's Reformationsaltar at Stadtkirche, Wittenberg, Germany, 1547.

from the 1970's as well as more recent walking tours[21] name plainly the violence that christological readings of the Old Testament can inflict on Jews and other marginalized people. Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby calls Christian preachers to add their voices to this work of witness by offering more diverse voices of Christian witness, by unsettling christological typologies applied to the Old Testament, and by reconsidering our traditions. Her work reminds us that preaching the Old Testament is not a matter of uncritical repetition of Gregory's tradition or even Gardner Taylor's words. Rather, preaching the OT invites us into God's ongoing work of expanding, unmasking, and recontextualizing us and our traditions for the sake of the liberation of all people.

Rev. David M. Stark, Th.D., is Assistant Professor of Homiletics at the School of Theology, The University of the South, and Editor of IJH.

E-mail: dmstark@sewanee.edu.

[21] For instance, Rick Steve's walking tour of the Jewish Ghetto in Rome proclaims of San Gregorio's portal: "The plaque is quoting the words of the Jewish prophet, Isaiah, but misuses them to give it an anti-sematic twist" ("Jewish Ghetto Walk," Rick Steve's Europe, https://podcasts.ricksteves.com/walkingtours/TheJewishGhetto.mp3 [accessed 01/27/2022].