Response to Carolyn J. Sharp

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1. Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the work of my homiletical colleague Dr. Carolyn Sharp. Her paper invites us early on to dig into the dirt and enters its layers and sediments with the curiosity and critical capacity of an archaeologist. I have long wondered how all of this unearthing and brushing could sustain a scholar. To me, the work of an archaeologist seems painstaking and even tedious. Dr. Sharp allows me to see this life for what it is: an opportunity to focus in on something with great depth and discernment, in her case the memory of Zion, but also a chance to unpack what she finds there with her incredible critical capacities as a scholar of the Hebrew Bible.

Two important things come from this realization about Dr. Sharp’s paper. First, an archaeologist is not solely interested in the object of study as if it existed on its own. Archaeologists do their work while asking questions about the physical position of any find in a digging site—an apt way of describing the difficult work that the Christian preacher has in dealing with texts from the Hebrew Bible. Second, the appeal to life in the dirt, digging, and the critical tasks of the archaeologist are at the same time a metaphor for the work we homileticians and preachers do. Her archaeological metaphor offers a visual frame for rethinking the simplistic ways in which we preachers sometimes deal with texts and actually occlude our positionalities. In the process, Dr. Sharp envisions a complex and nuanced relationship between a Hebrew Bible text like Psalm 87 and Christian preaching today.

2. The Memory of Zion

Perhaps the most compelling thing about her paper is the way she made me want to dig with her. Dr. Sharp refuses to let any sort of romantic conception of the spadework needing to be done keep her from asking the most critical questions. She holds up the memory of Zion like a multi-faceted gem. While reading Dr. Sharp’s paper, I might easily just skip from one beautiful insight to the next and get caught up in the gem’s aesthetic power. But she never loses sight of
the real critical work that goes alongside the aesthetic. In Dr. Sharp’s scholarly hands, the multivalence of the memory of Zion is far more than shimmers of insight, they are always and everywhere understood in situ. To recover such psalmic texts, especially for Christian communal memory, requires a faithfulness to their own contexts as well as the power exercised within those texts and contexts, both then and now. “The truths and erasures of this sacred place—of Zion’s architecture and grounds, literal and figurative—may be explored, sifted, and cherished by all who claim as holy the memory of Jerusalem. (emphasis mine)” Dr. Sharp issues a powerful call to Christian preachers of such texts. We may be fascinated by the aesthetic beauty of a psalm or prophetic vision, but such texts themselves are both “constructed and contested.” It is this deep critical commitment that makes Dr. Sharp’s archaeological analogy for preaching both compelling and challenging. In his famous Harper’s article on preaching in 1928, Harry Emerson Fosdick quipped that no one comes to church wondering what happened to the Jebusites. Dr. Sharp disagrees. She invites us to brood over these texts about the memory of Zion, to consider the real displacements along the way both then and now, and to be open to a kind of homiletical reflection that receives these ancient gifts with trembling hands.

3. The Metaphor and Its Entailments

At the same time, I find myself reading Dr. Sharp’s text from the unique critical standpoint of the homiletician, for whom her archaeological metaphor of digging dirt and sifting matters profoundly. One of the first texts my PhD supervisor David Buttrick had me read at Vanderbilt in the early 1990s was Lakoff and Johnson’s Metaphors We Live By. Metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson argued, have a systematizing quality to them. If, as Lakoff pointed out, argument=war, martialized metaphors about persuasion end up proliferating and acting as a magnet on our understanding. The systematicity of that particular metaphor can mean that argument often or always seems to be about domination. The danger, of course, with any metaphor, even a good one like the digging and sifting work of the archaeologist, is found at the limit of its systematicity and entailments. This is why I love deeply how Dr. Sharp takes us to the edge of the metaphor’s validity to the very paradoxes that give birth to the need for deeper homiletical discernment. In one section of her article she cites Israeli poet Amichai who points out that we ourselves “belong to ‘this heap of dust’” that the archaeologists are sifting. Please note the subtle shift in point of view going on in her quote as the metaphorical tensions emerge with her archaeological digging. We are no longer just in the dirt doing the digging, we are dust ourselves and part of the “detritus.” The metaphorical shift does more than to just unite us with the past, as Dr. Sharp goes on to point out in her article, it also switches the subject and
changes point of view along the way. I find in this breaking open of the archaeological metaphor a space for preaching to learn to act differently and in a way that accounts in speech for point of view.

Why does this matter? I think that the now broken metaphoric frame touches the heart of Dr. Sharp’s project. “Homiletical remembering is catalytic work that can bring transformation, not least by confirming what has been repressed or disrupting that which has become facile. As Deeg observes, ‘Christian preaching ... disrupts—theologically speaking—the circles which the self-imprisoned subject has drawn’ around the self.” in Places of metaphoric disruption, images breaking down, places where stories stammer into silence reveal the limits of our language—and often by challenging an assumed, systematized point of view. In my opinion, this is where much contemporary preaching of the Hebrew Bible struggles most: to move beyond a monological form of discourse and an often-unacknowledged point of view, especially with privileged voices. Many traditions, some of them newly emerging, are already developing a path to embracing point of view and positionality in a kind of critical intersubjectivity. Even so, much of the challenge remains because of a kind of Cartesian attachment to texts homiletically lifted out of their constructed and contested nature. In my opinion, the problem is on the side of preaching discourse: how to develop a rhetoric and a practice of point of view that can be contained in the ephemeral, evanescent language of preaching in the presence of real human beings embodying difference.

The dangers of not finding a homiletical way forward are clear. Dr. Sharp quotes Angus Paddison, “Jewish-Christian understanding challenges Christians to find a vocabulary of fulfilment that does not become a polemic of displacement.” An inability to operate where our metaphors of homiletical interpretation “break down” runs the risk of reinscribing the very problems we aim to address. A rhetoric or a conversational grammar of point of view (Buttrick, McClure) will prove crucial for a homiletic that can name the memory of Zion in the productive terms that Dr. Sharp envisions.

4. The Critical Beauty of Shards and Fragments

Even so, Dr. Sharp helps us, not by giving us something complete, but shards and fragments that result from her archaeological metaphor for Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. These are the daughter of Zion, the expansive community of “Zion remembers,” and the resonant power of Zion as eschatological hope. The vision is beautiful, yes, but nonetheless piecemeal, and requires a new diligence from preachers who are only beginning to fashion a kind of preaching language today that can carry it forward. For those of us who are committed to moving beyond Christian supersessionism and the simplistic ways we preachers deal with
Hebrew Bible texts, Dr. Sharp equips us with both a metaphor and a critical challenge to rethink the possibilities of Christian preaching of the Hebrew Bible.

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