

The Useless Vinestock: A Multiple Point-of-View Sermon from Ezekiel 15 with Critical Evaluation

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Theoretical Approach of Sermon

From the novice homiletics student to seasoned veteran preacher, anyone who has ever been tasked to preach has undergone the same gruelling experience: staring at a biblical text and wondering desperately how to shape the content of the text into a coherent—and hopefully inspiring!—sermon. The journey from text to sermon is oftentimes a difficult one to negotiate since it involves not only the attempt to discover and articulate some cogent meaning from the text itself, but also shaping the sermon into some sort of interesting and engaging form that will not put listeners to sleep. Further complicating the situation is the issue of attempting to stay faithful to the original form or genre of the biblical text in the ultimate form taken by the sermon.

Beyond remaining faithful to the form of the text, the issue of sermon form is of critical importance since it serves as a crucial component in the goal of achieving the preacher's hoped-for homiletical and rhetorical strategies. An effective sermon form ideally accomplishes at least three goals: first it secures and holds listeners' interest, second increases levels of audience participation and finally can positively shape both their experiences of the biblical material and their faith.¹ For example in terms of traditional preaching, homileticians have long observed that traditional propositional-deductive preaching often displays the tendency to reinforce the hierarchical authority of both the preacher and the church as an organization, and ultimately creates an audience of passive recipients.² Moreover, with its third-person referential language, this type of preaching both objectifies God and reinforces the notion that listeners should understand Scripture in terms of rational statements and formulaic propositions.³ Conversely, sermons that seek to create an experience for the listener embrace more conative aspects of change by seeking to engage the hearers'

¹ Craddock, *Preaching*, 172-174. Of course these rhetorical goals are to some extent theoretical in terms of what the preacher ideally aims to accomplish with the sermon itself.

² Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 46. This sermon form consists of a central thesis statement broken down into its relevant structural parts that is put into an outline format. Propositional preaching "is concerned with unity, parallel development, symmetry, distinction, and progression. Clarity and rationality are its preaching strength" (Cahill, *The Shape of Preaching*, 20).

³ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 56.

minds and emotions alike.⁴ Moreover such preaching advocates such values as more democratic leadership, increased dialogue and potential listener participation in the sermon event. Such preaching therefore embraces an ethos of non-hierarchical leadership whereby preaching becomes part of the on-going communal conversation.⁵

The multi-vocal narrative sermon from the text of Ezekiel 15 below demonstrates just such a homiletical approach: to create an experience of the biblical text for the listener by giving “voice to different perspectives as a rhetorical device.”⁶ Moreover such an approach provides preachers (and bored listeners!) with an alternative sermon pattern.⁷ Based upon an exegetical investigation of the rhetorical and narratological dynamics of the oracle in Ezekiel 15, this sample sermon illustrates the homiletical value that the preacher can—and should—replicate the rhetorical dynamics of the biblical text within the rhetoric of the sermon form itself.⁸ Moreover, since the literary unit of Ezekiel 15 does not provide interpretative closure the sermon likewise ends on an ambiguous note. Such an open-ended rhetorical strategy puts the reader in the position of pondering the rhetorical effectiveness of both the message of Ezekiel 15 and moreover the efficacy of Ezekiel’s ministry within the entire book.⁹

The sermon below adapts its narrative based upon a rhetorical-critical-narratological reading of the entire book of Ezekiel that views the work as a first-person autobiographical portrayal of the prophet. As the character-narrator of the book, Ezekiel relates to the reader his charge: the unenviable task of directly conveying Yahweh’s oracles to his fellow-exiles in Babylon (Ezek. 3.1-11).¹⁰ The following narrative sermon takes into account the varied points of view as represented both within the entire book of Ezekiel and specifically the text of Ezekiel 15.

⁴ McDonald, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 600.

⁵ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 123.

⁶ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 57; see also Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 46, 100.

⁷ Long points out that “preachers must guard against gravitating toward a narrow range of sermon patterns. As preachers, we tend to create sermon forms that match our own ways of listening and learning, and therefore we must self-consciously move beyond our own preferred patterns” (*The Witness of Preaching*, 169).

⁸ Craddock notes that for many preachers: “If one were to compare a large section of Scripture with a file of sermons based on that section, one of the most noticeable differences between the two would be the striking variety in the literary forms of the one as over against the dull uniformity of the other” (*As One Without Authority*, 113).

⁹ For example, Ezekiel’s commission introduces the reader to a high level of potential conflict since Yahweh tells him that he is being sent to a “hard-hearted and rebellious people” who most likely would not listen to Ezekiel’s warnings (Ezek. 3.4-9).

¹⁰ For a further study on this topic see “The 2 Rhetorical Situations of Ezekiel: A Rhetorical-Critical Study of the Mission of the Prophet” by this author, available online at http://preachersforum.org/?page_id=232.

The ideal rhetorical goal of this sermon is to re-create the rhetorical and narratological dynamics of Ezekiel 15 as seen over against the larger contextual and rhetorical situation of the book of Ezekiel. To accomplish this objective the sermon represents three points of view: the first voice is the character-narrator Ezekiel, tasked by Yahweh with delivering the oracle to his fellow-exiles. The second voice heard is that of a generic representative exilic spokesperson who serves as a member of Ezekiel's actual audience; and finally the voice of Yahweh the rhetor concludes the sermon. Finally, the study concludes with a critical analysis that evaluates the potential weaknesses and strengths of both the exegesis of Ezekiel 15 and the sermon itself.

This open-ended homiletical approach not only ideally allows the listeners to engage in alternative interpretations, it moreover trusts the audience to respond to the text with the aid of the Spirit.¹¹ Although potentially creating insecurity or frustration within those church cultures accustomed to traditional sermon styles,¹² dialogic or intentionally open-ended sermons carry the increased possibility of higher ownership on the part of listeners choosing to engage in the process.¹³

Multiple Point-Of-View Narrative Sermon: “The Worthless Vinestock” Ezekiel 15 (NASB)

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying,² “Son of man, how is the wood of the vine *better* than any wood of a branch which is among the trees of the forest?³ Can wood be taken from it to make anything, or can *men* take a peg from it on which to hang any vessel?⁴ If it has been put into the fire for fuel, *and* the fire has consumed both of its ends and its middle part has been charred, is it *then* useful for anything?⁵ Behold, while it is intact, it is not made into anything. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it still be made into anything!

⁶ Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘As the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of

¹¹ Craddock, *Preaching*, 17, 30, 136.

¹² Craddock points out in this regard: “To have placed more responsibility on the listeners, to have left alternatives open to them, to have permitted their response to be the conclusion, would have been to create panic and insecurity, and thus to totally frustrate the flock” (*As One Without Authority*, 46).

¹³ For preachers seeking to change the “listening culture” of a congregation this type of preaching is certainly risky. However, Sweet notes: “Despite the risks, there are even greater risks in nonparticipation” (*The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 84).

Jerusalem; ⁷ and I set My face against them. *Though* they have come out of the fire, yet the fire will consume them. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I set My face against them. ⁸ Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have acted unfaithfully,” declares the Lord GOD.

Point of View 1: Ezekiel, the Character-Narrator

I’ve just returned from delivering yet another of Yahweh’s oracles to my fellow-exiles here in Babylon. Quite a lot of time may go by in between them—days, weeks, months or even years—and then the word of Yahweh comes to me again. His oracles always begin the same way. Whenever I hear those fateful words, “Son of man...” I know I have yet another message to deliver.

Let me guess what you might be thinking. Why did Yahweh choose me, as if I haven’t been through enough? Briefly, I will tell you my story. Back in our homeland my life was set out clearly: I would become a priest, trained for a lifetime of service to Yahweh in the Temple. Unfortunately for me, I never had the chance to serve in the Temple. The Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem and many of us were forced into exile in this cursed land. So here we sit, along the banks of the Kebar River in Babylon, our whole existence summed up in one word: survival. And as if that wasn’t enough to have to deal with, Yahweh chose *me* to be his prophet to the exiles.

Perhaps you are wondering how all of this came about. How is it that I, a failed priest, ended up as a prophet to a group of Jewish exiles in Babylon? Yahweh commissioned me a few years ago, not that long after we had arrived here. I was thirty years of age when I saw an overwhelming vision of Yahweh in the skies near the river. After the vision Yahweh informed me that he had appointed me to be his prophet sent to my fellow-exiles. Even describing my experiences later I struggle to explain it. Afterwards, I couldn’t even speak for a week. I was completely dumbfounded, and I supposed that people thought I had gone completely out of my head.

You might think that a divine commission as a prophet would be a great job that anybody would desire, but that would be far from the truth. Yahweh informed me that I wouldn’t exactly have an easy ministry. He told me that my listeners were nothing but a stubborn, rebellious and hard-hearted bunch. They weren’t going to listen at all to the words he would have me speak! How is that for a job description for a prophet? However—if this is any consolation at all—he promised to make me tough

enough to stand up to the task, saying my face would be ‘as hard as flint.’ In any event this toughness has turned out to be a lifesaver for me, since he has ordered me to perform some incredibly difficult and frankly humiliating activities in front of the exiles.

You might ask: why didn’t I complain? Why didn’t I ask Yahweh to find somebody else to do the job? In our Scriptures, we read how Moses, Jeremiah and Gideon all protested that God should choose somebody else who would be up to the task. Jonah didn’t even stick around to argue about it, he simply boarded a ship heading in the opposite direction to Nineveh!

But in my case I had no illusions about the complexity of the situation. I knew that we Jews were in exile precisely because as a people we were defiled. Despite being Yahweh’s chosen people we had disobeyed him, breaking his covenant scores of times over and committing idolatry—along with multiple other violations of the *Torah*. In my naiveté, perhaps I thought that I could serve as an example to my fellow-exiles. Maybe the oracles of Yahweh I delivered might just convince them that he had not abandoned us in exile.

What about this oracle that Yahweh had me deliver? I’ll grant him two points: first, it was mercifully short; I was able to deliver it in just a few moments. Second, it was very cleverly laid out. The first part of the oracles involved just asking my fellow-exiles a few seemingly innocuous rhetorical questions. As a treasured symbol of our national identity, we Israelites love the image of Israel as a fruitful and blessed vine that grows in a well-watered place of peace and safety. But Yahweh took that image and gave it a clever, subtle twist. Rather than focusing on what my fellow-exiles might expect, which was the *fruit* of the vine, he focused instead on the *wood* of the vine itself—the vinestock.

From that point all of his rhetorical questions related to the uselessness of the vinestock, especially when compared to lumber and firewood taken from the mighty trees of the forest. Can that skinny little vinestock be used to build useful structures? No. Can one even use it to make a peg to hang a pot on the wall? No. Is it useful as firewood? No—one certainly can’t get much warmth from thin little vinestocks tossed on a fire. Furthermore, once the vinestock has been burned and charred, can anything useful be made from it? No. Since it was virtually useless for any serviceable purpose before being put on the fire, how could it possibly be afterwards? The verdict was clear: the vine-stock had absolutely no productive value. At this point in the oracle,

the audience were nodding in agreement. They may not have enjoyed his focus on the vine-stock instead of its fruit, but still the audience understood and even agreed with Yahweh's argument.

If only Yahweh had allowed me to stop at that point perhaps none of my fellow-exiles would have been offended. Unfortunately for both me and my audience, the oracle contained a second half. As Yahweh had already made clear the only possible use for the vine-stock was as firewood, and even then one can't get much warmth. Toss a bundle of vines on to the fire! Burn it up, enjoy the few minutes of precious heat before the fire consumes them. Even with that point my audience agreed. But then Yahweh had me tell them that just like the useless vine-stock burning in the fire, the same fate awaits those still living in Jerusalem. What?

Yes, it was all too true. To those exiles that stayed to hear the rest of the oracle, I had to inform them that Yahweh set his face against the Jerusalemites. This statement, however, posed a serious problem. My fellow-exiles will certainly wonder if anybody in Jerusalem will survive apparently certain doom. Imagine picking up the charred ends of the vine-stock that have fallen out of the fire. What does one do with them? Of course—throw the ends back into the fire. Yahweh's point was that Jerusalem will suffer the same fate when it falls, and even those who survive the initial onslaught will be annihilated.

For certain this message of Yahweh was grim. And worse yet, if it were possible, he had me tell them that even the homeland will become desolate. I am sure my fellow-exiles must have wondered how such a situation could come to pass. The last line of the oracle revealed the reason. Yahweh indicated that the Jerusalemites had been unfaithful to him. But this last piece of news presented a major problem for me and my fellow-exiles. We are in Babylon! Our friends and family still living in Jerusalem would never hear this oracle of impending doom. The only ones who heard it were the exiles standing before me, hundreds of miles away from the homeland. One may ask why Yahweh had me deliver this message to the exiles, since we are absolutely unable to divert the fate of Jerusalem.

My fellow-exiles had to face the sobering reality that if Yahweh would not spare the Jews in Jerusalem for their unfaithfulness, he may not spare any of the exiles who are unfaithful to him in Babylon. But this statement involves the ultimate irony: for Yahweh, the future of his people no longer lies with the Jerusalemites, but with these unfaithful and defiled exiles all around me! They are going to have to realize

that Yahweh's glorious vision of the future will not take place if they continue to persist in their unfaithful behaviour.

Am I certain that Jerusalem will in fact be destroyed? What if it never comes to pass? If that is the case then this proclamation puts me in a very precarious situation to say the least. According to the *Torah* I can be stoned as a false prophet if Jerusalem never falls. My only defence is to reply that I am only acting in my capacity as a watchman. I deliver oracles exactly as I hear them from Yahweh. I am only the messenger, no matter how unpleasant the messages may be. However, although at times I have disputed with Yahweh, nonetheless I continue to submit and obey. I am deeply concerned about my audience, but I am not responsible for their choices. I can only make my own choices, which free me to continue to act with intentionality.

I have few illusions about my audience. I have known since my prophetic commission that they would not listen to my words. My resounding message from Yahweh to my fellow-exiles is clear: *Jerusalem is doomed*. If the city falls, then these exiles will be shaken down to the very core of their beings. Maybe then they will listen. Yahweh's message involves knocking down every pillar of support in which they believe, and upon which they base their future hope and security. But to be perfectly honest: I don't believe they will listen.

Point of View 2: An Exilic Spokesperson

We have just heard the "prophet" Ezekiel deliver the latest oracle that he still insists comes to him directly from Yahweh. Afterwards the few of us left discussed the possibility that what he said might be true, as well its implications. We were even able to reach a conclusion of sorts. Before I tell you what we concluded, I need to explain a bit of our history. Although we would certainly rather be back in our homeland, in point of fact life here in exile is actually not all that bad—all things considered. Granted it may not be a perfect life, but for the most part the Babylonians leave us alone as long as we keep to ourselves, act like good citizens and perform what they ask of us. Having said that, though, let me be clear on one point. Just because this exile is not completely horrible does not mean that we want to live here indefinitely! Above all else, we exiles are certain that our situation will soon be put to rights. We will be home shortly and this experience will fade into distant memory.

One might ask: how can we be so certain of this claim? The answer is straightforward. You have to understand that for us here in Babylon, Jerusalem represents quite literally everything that is important to us. As long as the city continues to stand we know that this exile will soon be over. I can anticipate your next question: upon what basis are we making that statement? Quite simple, really—we are absolutely certain that the city will never fall. This is because Jerusalem forms the very foundation of our hope, our security—in short, our very theology. To put it bluntly, we know for certain that Yahweh will never—I repeat *never*—allow Jerusalem to be destroyed. In this regard, we have an absolutely unassailable argument built on a strong history of teaching and traditions that have been handed down among our people for generations. Please allow me to explain.

Yahweh makes his home in the Temple. I cannot make my point any clearer. Since that is so, we know beyond all doubt that Yahweh will not stand idly by and let pagan infidels destroy his home. Does not the Scripture indicate that Yahweh informed King Solomon upon the dedication of the Temple that his name would be there forever, that his eyes and his heart would always be there? We know that he never violates his covenants and promises. What is more, Jerusalem is the holy and chosen city of Yahweh since it houses his Temple. Just look to our Scriptures and discover for yourself how many times Yahweh has saved the city from certain destruction. For example, did he not deliver Jerusalem from the Assyrian hordes when there seemed no way of deliverance? Scripture attests to the fact that Yahweh is always committed to save his precious city.

What makes our case even stronger is the fact that sitting upon the throne we have the kingly line of David chosen by Yahweh himself. This equates to the preservation of Jerusalem as well, since we know that Yahweh has pledged never to wipe out the Davidic line. It would violate his immutable word. Scripture indicates that Yahweh promised David that one from his line would sit on the throne forever!

There is yet another reason that we know Jerusalem will never fall. Yahweh chose us as his people when he made a covenant with our patriarch Abraham. In Scripture we see that Yahweh promised Abraham that the very nation that came from his line would be a blessed nation as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. For him to annihilate us would be a violation of his binding covenant.

If all of this evidence is not enough for you to be convinced of our cause, we possess one last bit of proof that Jerusalem will never fall: we have an emotional

attachment with our homeland since our loved ones still exist there. Clearly a loving God would not destroy those innocents. We know that this is not the way that he behaves. All of this evidence from our proud traditions and Scripture proves for a fact that God is on our side. All we are merely asking him to do is to honour his immutable promises and to be consistent with his nature. We know that he is a faithful God who neither leaves nor forsakes his chosen people in his chosen city.

There is another perspective to this issue also. We exiles have heard conflicting reports coming from other quarters. Perhaps you were unaware that Ezekiel is not the only prophet here in Babylon? Claiming to speak for Yahweh, these other prophets insist that Jerusalem will be spared! To whom should we listen? Each prophet alleges that he speaks for Yahweh, but none of us can decide which of these prophets are false and which speaks the truth. Perhaps time will tell, so it might be best not to commit to any position and just wait for events to unfold as they inevitably will. Then we will pick up our stones...

Finally, I have one last point to make before I go to my home. It is beyond all doubt—the facts are abundantly clear—we are not to blame for our exile. The truth is that we are suffering in Babylon as a result of the sins of our forefathers. Sour grapes! We would like to know why Yahweh insists upon punishing us for their sins—surely he will not hold the grandchildren responsible for the sins of the grandparents. Once this injustice is brought to his attention, as we are sure it soon will be, our situation here will quickly be rectified and we will return to the homeland.

There is something that gives us food for thought, however, What if the unthinkable occurs and Yahweh completely abandons his chosen people? If that were true then Jerusalem's fate hangs by a thread. However, even if Yahweh has deserted us, all is not lost. In order to safeguard our situation, we have not one but *two* contingency plans to ensure we are covered. First, each of us is wearing a special amulet. These magic charms will certainly assure Jerusalem's safety. Those who sold them to us practically guaranteed a one hundred percent success rate! But what if the amulets don't work? No problem—as a last resort we have our second option. We have every confidence that our leaders back home can form an alliance with one of the surrounding nations, and that will stave off Jerusalem's destruction. This certainly would not be the first time that diplomacy has saved us from a threatening situation. Even if we have to debase ourselves or have to pay tribute to another nation as we've done in the past, this is still better than allowing Jerusalem to be destroyed.

So you can clearly see that all of these reasons give us the certain knowledge that Yahweh will spare Jerusalem. With such certitude we have, by now it should be obvious why we did not pay too much attention to this latest “oracle” Ezekiel said he received. Certainly we agreed that the wood from the vine is indeed worthless, but why compare Israel to a vinestock? The luscious fruit-bearing vine is our national symbol! The comparison between the vinestock and wood from trees is unfair and also frankly offensive. As if that weren’t enough, Ezekiel definitively crossed the line when he proceeded from *that* unfair comparison to several statements about how Yahweh was going to have Jerusalem destroyed. Maybe those in Jerusalem have been unfaithful to Yahweh a time or two, but name me one person who has not been unfaithful to him. Surely we exiles have not acted unfaithfully. Clearly this whole situation is little more than a misunderstanding that will soon be rectified.

As I mentioned earlier, those of us who heard it reached a conclusion of sorts about this oracle. The hard reality is that we are divided in our opinions; we cannot come to an agreement about this latest message. Some of us think Ezekiel clearly suffers from delusions of prophetic grandeur. Remember, we are speaking of a man who claims to be a prophet commissioned by Yahweh. Of course we look upon such a claim with the utmost seriousness. But at the same time, who has ever heard of a prophet performing actions similar to Ezekiel? While claiming to speak for Yahweh, the reality is he babbles nothing more than riddles. Although he may be interesting to listen to at times, at the end of the day his words stand for nothing more than indecipherable parables. Thus some of us maintain that Ezekiel is absolutely mistaken. Jerusalem will be spared and soon enough we will be back in our homeland, worshipping at the Temple just as before. Matters will surely be put to rights soon enough, and life will carry on without interruption.

Some of us urge caution, however. They state that even if Ezekiel is a bit mad he may in fact be correct. If the messages he delivers come directly from Yahweh then they will absolutely come to pass. Furthermore, if Jerusalem falls it would be hard to see any type of future hope for our nation. According to Ezekiel, however, Yahweh has a future plan for those of us in exile, but it is hard to see the way through to that future. It would appear that he is attempting to destroy the very foundations of everything we accept as correct, which forms our entire belief system. If we abandon those beliefs where does that leave us? Where can we go from there? Surely we have

learned our lesson. Haven't we suffered enough? Why can't we simply return to our old way of life before all of this happened?

Point of View 3: Yahweh, the Rhetor

You may well ask: why did I choose Ezekiel to reach the exiles rather than a more effective approach to communicate my purposes and plans? Why task him with such a difficult mission in Babylon? Why commission him with not one, not two, but *three* distinct offices: as a prophet; as a priest; and a watchman? You must be thinking that surely there must be a more effective way to reach these hard-hearted people. Yet despite this reality I still chose Ezekiel and tasked him to carry out my mission to the exiles. Why?

It is clear that Ezekiel's assignment overwhelmed him from the beginning when he encountered a vision of me that he can never truly put into words. He sat stunned for a week afterwards! To be fair to him, though, once he accepted the commission to be my prophet and watchman, he performed every difficult task I have asked of him, although he has questioned me at times. This proves that I made the correct choice: although he submits he is certainly not without a backbone. One of the positive aspects to these tasks is the fact that since he suffers in plain view of his fellow-exiles, this has increased his credibility in the eyes of the exilic community. Perhaps now they will listen. I ask you: what is the alternative? If I had thundered proclamations from the clouds down upon their heads, they would have run away in terror like the Israelites did at Mount Sinai. This explains why I have tasked the man Ezekiel to deliver my messages to them in ways they would understand and possibly act upon.

Ezekiel already told you that the exilic audience certainly understood the value of the vine as a fruit-bearing plant but took offence to the way in which I compared its wood to trees. I used that strategy to hammer home the point concerning the imminent fate of Jerusalem. At this point you might wonder why I had Ezekiel deliver a message about the fate of Jerusalem to exiles living nearly one thousand miles away. Surely this message would be better suited for the ears of the Jerusalemites than the exiles? In reality, however, it was precisely the exiles that needed to hear this message since Jerusalem's doom is assured. The exiles must grasp the reality that nothing they can say or do will spare the city from imminent destruction. Moreover, if the Jerusalemites will not be spared on account of their unfaithfulness, why should I spare

the exiles if they also persist in unfaithfulness? The exiles cannot appeal to their “special status” while committing the same atrocities and expect me to do nothing but turn a blind eye.

Beyond this point, the oracle also has many implications for the exiles. They must understand first that their time in exile will be longer rather than shorter. They will not enjoy a speedy return to their homeland where they can go back to living exactly as they did prior to their deportation. Although brutal, my plan to provide a future for them involves wiping away virtually every aspect of their old way of life, along with its accompanying—and comforting—belief system. I am about to smash into a thousand pieces everything they thought they know or understand about me: their ritualistic religion, their security in Jerusalem and the Temple.

My desire for them is to focus on the future I have in store for them, and this can only happen when they leave the past far behind. Furthermore, once Jerusalem falls the exiles will no longer be able to view me as their cosmic servant who fits neatly into their conceptual box. I am not irrevocably tied to honour their every want, their every desire and every wish. I cannot be controlled and am not tied to the commitments they make for me. I must be completely free to do what I must do, even if that involves visiting a very distasteful act of judgement upon my chosen people.

I agree that as a spokesman, Ezekiel was truly burdened with an unenviable—and perhaps impossible—task. I engaged him with the mission of nothing less than destroying utterly the theological worldview of the exiles. However, this task involved only one aspect of my bigger picture. Only when their entire belief system lies in tatters and ruin may the exiles finally come to the place where they listen to my future plans for the nation. This can only take place when Jerusalem finally falls, which is the foundation forming their entire argument. One could say that the destruction of Jerusalem serves as a metaphor for the destruction of their entire theological position.

You may ask: why do I have to shatter their entire belief system? It is clear that on the one hand their beliefs have deluded them into thinking that their position is airtight and therefore unassailable. If this continues to go unchallenged they will never experience change. On the other hand, their position puts me into a completely untenable position. Their view makes me contingent by tying me irreversibly to honour their claims and promises that I never made, and thus makes me their servant.

As a result I will never be free to carry out my plans and purposes; therefore this condition cannot be allowed to continue.

Even though I have to destroy, nonetheless my ultimate plan for the exiles still preserves a sense of their national identity. I am committed to carrying out the entire strategy that involves far-reaching future implications. My hope for them is that in the future, their personal and corporate identity will still be intact. Some day the people may see that it was my hand—and the work of my Spirit—that preserved them both as individuals and as a nation. Do you think I enjoy having to work by these means, judging my chosen people that will always have a special place in my heart forever? Believe me, I do not rejoice when my people suffer.

Despite this I am still committed to seeing my plan through to the bitter end. You must realize that my people were unfaithful to me even though I have never been unfaithful to them. I would be perfectly within the legal rights of the covenant to destroy them one hundred times over for their numerous violations. Despite this situation, I could not bring myself to wipe them out utterly from the face of the earth, even though they deserved it time and again. These are my chosen people, the ones whom I love. The exiles are the future; they are the only hope for the preservation of my chosen people. One day in the future I will remove their hardened hearts of stone and replace them with a soft heart of flesh. This will be the work of my Spirit that brings about this transformation. One day they will serve me safe in their land once again; but it is I who will have made it all possible.

In spite of all the hammer-blows I have rained down upon them, in spite of all the hardship and the suffering, I still fear that these exiles will persist in their unfaithfulness to me. They must come to the place where they abandon their cherished hold upon the past and embrace the glorious future I have promised for them. Hope for the future can only come from trusting in me alone. The future I envision for them will never happen as long as the exiles cling to the illusory hope that Jerusalem will be spared. Ultimately the exiles must make the choice to abandon their unfaithfulness and enter into my future I have for them. This is where I stand; I have made my case clear.

Critical Analysis of Sermon

Potential Weaknesses

1. The argument of the points of view involving the three characters is difficult to sustain from Ezekiel 15 alone without appealing to the larger contextual situation of Ezekiel. For example, the response of the exilic audience is not clearly represented in this unit, although their presence can be noted in the use of the second-person plural of 15.7a.¹⁴ Furthermore, Ezekiel's point of view in this unit is the same as Yahweh, if one understands the character-narrator to be faithfully delivering the words of Yahweh verbatim. If read in isolation, literary units like this one may not be able to serve this particular multiple point-of-view sermon form.

One interpretative value illustrated by this sermon is that the rhetorical function of smaller literary units should be understood in light of the contextual situation of the entire discourse. In the case of a narrative literary unit where the response of the addressees to the speaker is not readily apparent, the preacher can still replicate the dynamics between various characters in light of the contextual and rhetorical situation of the book as a whole. The sermon established the exilic point of view by noting the various responses of the exiles to Yahweh's oracles throughout the discourse of Ezekiel, and also from direct statements about them from Yahweh to Ezekiel. An understanding of the situational nature of the rhetoric involved in the entire discourse therefore becomes indispensable for establishing and replicating these points of view within the sermon when drawn from a particular literary unit.

2. Some listeners may feel uncomfortable with the presentation of Yahweh's point of view. The representation of Yahweh in this manner brings about a unique perspective that perhaps receives little time in most pulpits. In this regard Brueggemann points out that since Scripture itself does this, likewise sermons should also provide alternate points of view: "Scripture presents a counter-view of the world, one that militates against the dominant worldviews encountered in societies."¹⁵ Even though some may feel as if this sermon takes poetic licence with Yahweh as a character, a careful

¹⁴ Yahweh here distinguishes between the putative or ostensible Jerusalemite audience ("I set my face against *them*") and the actual exilic audience of the oracle ("then *you* will know that I am Yahweh.") see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 318; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 17; and Cooke, *Ezekiel*, 158.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 16. In terms of the prophets, he states, Yahweh "is a key player in the life of the world, even though YHWH as a key player had been largely excluded or domesticated by dominant descriptions of reality. That counterdescription is everywhere committed to representing YHWH as the decisive agent in the life of Israel and in the affairs of the nations" (16).

reading of the entirety of Ezekiel clearly portrays him as a decisive agent who acts with intentionality. Over and over Yahweh indicates to the exilic audience that he is the one behind the judgement upon both Israel and certain foreign nations.

The sermon illustrates Yahweh's central concern behind the doom prophecies within texts such as Ezekiel 15, which was to convince the exiles that their hope of well-being and independence—founded on the inviolability of Jerusalem—was indeed false.¹⁶ Ezekiel therefore serves as a theodicy since it explains the motivation of Yahweh as evidenced by his actions of judgement upon both Israel and foreign nations. The sample sermon represents this point of view by articulating in this theodicy—drawn from the way in which the discourse of Ezekiel characterizes Yahweh—a careful analysis of both voice hierarchy and Yahweh's role in the rhetorical situation.¹⁷

3. Although the sermon attempts to portray the fairest possible point of view of the various characters involved nonetheless one cannot avoid making certain interpretative moves. Narrative-styled sermons necessitate the inclusion of subjective elements, especially when one attempts to bring a character's voice to life beyond the details found within the discourse. While subjectivity in interpretation is inevitable and unavoidable, it can be balanced, controlled and employed in a disciplined way for the good of the text.¹⁸ Furthermore, the combination of gaps within the text and the way in which the narrator presents the narrative encourage or even demand interpretation.¹⁹ As noted earlier, the open-ended nature of the discourse lends itself to a multi-vocal and open-ended homiletical form, which invites participation by intentionally creating a space for listeners to wrestle with their own conclusions.

This sermon locates itself within what Cosgrove and Edgerton term the “toward” side of homiletics, which both seeks to hold form and content together in both interpretation and meaning. Moreover this homiletic seeks to provide a variety of

¹⁶ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 14.

¹⁷ “Voice hierarchy” refers to the practice in narrative texts of determining whose actual voice is speaking at any one time: the narrator or that of a specific character. See LaDriere, “Voice and Address” in *The Dictionary of World Literature*, 441-442. The “rhetorical situation” is based upon Bitzer's conception involving three elements: an audience, constraints or rhetorical strategies used by the speaker to persuade the audience, and an exigence, which is some sort of problem that needs to be addressed. See Bitzer, Lloyd. “The Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* Vol. 1 (1968): 1-14.

¹⁸ Fokkelmann, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

interpretative possibilities.²⁰ Such a stance embraces the more postmodern concept that all claims to truth are perspectival. Rather than asserting dogmatic conclusions in a deductive-propositional sermon form, sermons such as this can engender a respectful conversation by entertaining various points of view. Encountering a different “viewpoint often challenges preachers to clarify what they commend, and what they do not.”²¹ Therefore the sermon becomes an occasion to prompt growth and new discovery rather than providing traditional modernist authoritative and “closed-off” interpretations.²²

4. The objection may be raised that this sample sermon does not adequately replicate the particular genre of literature found within Ezekiel 15. For example, commentators have labelled this unit as a parable, an oracle or merely a prophetic text.²³ In particular, this criticism observes that the above multiple point-of-view sample sermon perpetuates some level of violence toward the genre of parable-like argument by analogy of the unit because its form was not reproduced homiletically.

This objection can be answered by noting Craddock’s point that the preacher need not be devoted to reproducing slavishly each aspect of a particular biblical form or genre. While at times the preacher can carry the shape of the text over into the sermon the preacher has freedom to utilize creativity when crafting the sermon form and not distort the biblical genre.²⁴ Rather than aiming to reproduce the technicalities of the genre of Ezekiel 15 exactly, this sermon built upon a rhetorical-critical-narratological study of both the book and the literary unit by illustrating the rhetorical dynamics and tensions that occur between the three sets of characters. As noted earlier this interpretative move was informed by reading the unit itself in light of contextual situation of Ezekiel. Recasting the sermon as a narrative populated with three characters creates a more accessible format with which listeners can engage, while still achieving the rhetorical strategies of the text. Upon this basis the sermon

²⁰ Cosgrove and Edgerton, *In Other Words*, 16.

²¹ Allen, “Preaching and Postmodernism,” 36.

²² Although one could argue that Yahweh’s point of view includes a many “closed” statements explanatory in nature, the discourse of Ezekiel serves as a theodicy of sorts as Yahweh continues to give to the exiles a multiplicity of reasons for his actions.

²³ For example Greenberg refers to the genre of 15 as an “oracle” divided into two halves (2-5 and 6-8), but does observe that the style of vv. 2-5 “approaches the poetic” with some evidences of parallelism (*Ezekiel 1-20*, 266). Cooke believes vv. 2-5 to be a “little poem” with metrical form, but that vv. 6-8 departs from any form of parallelism (Cooke, *Ezekiel* 156). Zimmerli notes two halves as well but labels vv.2-5 a parable and vv. 6-8 as its interpretation (*Ezekiel 1*, 318).

²⁴ Craddock, *Preaching*, 178.

demonstrates the ability to “do what the text does” and thus achieve what the text achieved in terms of rhetorical function.²⁵

5. The final potential weakness concerns the objection that a multiple point-of-view sermon effectively “closes off” other possible interpretative options for an audience. Obviously in a single sermon the preacher cannot possibly represent every possible interpretative option such as feminist, liberation, post-colonial and queer theologies. In order to answer this objection two points will be considered. The first point is that no single homiletical form will serve as a panacea that satisfies every objection. Multiple point-of-view sermons such as this are but one homiletical strategy available to the preacher. A values-based approach to preaching and congregational leadership intends to stimulate dialogue whether before, during or after the sermon. Such dialogue opens up interpretation of biblical texts by allowing for a collaborative roundtable discussion.²⁶

The second point involves the notion raised earlier: the postmodern assertion that all truth-claims are ultimately seen as perspectival in nature. The sermon embraced this notion by advocating a values-based homiletical approach based upon utilizing preaching forms giving voice to these multiple interpretative options. The recognition that every act of awareness is interpretative calls the preacher to help the congregation interpret the act of interpretation itself. By seeking to represent as fairly as possible the varying points of view listed within this sample sermon, the preacher can enable the congregation to become cognizant of their own interpretative lenses through which they perceive life. Such an exploration encourages deeper and more respectful conversations.²⁷

Potential Strengths

1. Multiple point-of-view sermons can create the possibility that the listeners both experience a fairer representation of each of the characters’ perspectives and open up room for continued dialogue. This point highlights the close relationship between preaching and congregational leadership philosophy in terms of the organizational culture of a faith community. As noted earlier it is clear that congregations

²⁵ Ibid., 28.

²⁶ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 49; see also McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching*, 61-62.

²⁷ Allen, “Preaching and Postmodernism,” 36.

accustomed to traditional ministry approaches may feel uncomfortable or even threatened by dialogical sermons and democratic leadership forms. Just like the situation Ezekiel faced, however, these old systems are in the process of passing away and new modes are approaching on the horizon. It is certainly the case that many churches continue to use increasingly ineffectual and outdated “zombie categories” of traditional practical theology.²⁸ In this regard congregational leaders would do well to acknowledge that these categories are increasingly “embedded in a world that is passing away before our eyes”²⁹ and introduce change accordingly.

The preaching situation in the Western tradition continues to evolve as older modes of once automatically-accepted church absolutes are trusted less and less. Traditional church structures are increasingly viewed as patriarchal, hierarchic, monologic and authoritarian. Sermons delivered within such structures nonverbally communicate clearly discernable lines of authoritarianism not only in intonation and manner, but also in the form and movement of the sermon also.³⁰ The Enlightenment goals of objectivity, rationality and clarity in both biblical studies and preaching militate against the more postmodern values of communal learning and increasingly non-hierarchical leadership.

In light of this situation Brueggemann advances the notion that the postmodern value of pluralism represents a new reality for preaching. A pluralistic context involves the connection between the orientation and perspective of an interpretative community that both hears and interprets the biblical text with an awareness of the polyvalent nature of Scripture.³¹ Within such a context preaching makes proposals and advocacies but does not seek to advance so-called “objective” conclusions. This mode of preaching can only function in a conversation where no one participant in the discussion seeks to convert the other to a particular interpretative conclusion because he or she is already certain of the outcome. Rather, the discussion functions when each participant enters “with full respect for the good

²⁸ Based upon sociologist Ulrich Becht’s conception of the “living dead,” zombie categories involve ways “of pointing to the continued employment of concepts that no longer do justice to the world we experience and yet which are difficult to abandon because of tradition and also because they are not yet totally redundant” (Reader, *Reconstructing Practical Theology*, 1).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁰ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 17.

³¹ Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 23.

faith of others and the willingness to entertain the troublesome thought that new ‘truth’ received together may well be out in front of any of us.”³²

Such a form of collaborative preaching and leadership fits within the homiletical values evidenced by the sermon. This approach may well fit emerging or postmodern church contexts that value multi-vocal sermons and non-hierarchical congregational leadership forms. Such communities embrace the values of connectedness, a sense of community and dialogue whereby all participants are encouraged to speak out in a context of trust and safety.³³

2. Although this is a sample sermon, it represents merely one homiletical possibility. A values-based homiletic operates under the working assumption that effective preaching takes place using a multiplicity of creative forms. On this basis preaching itself must be integrated in conjunction with congregational leadership styles, overall philosophy of ministry and finally the culture of the particular congregation. The homiletical form chosen for the literary unit of Ezekiel 15 therefore could involve many preaching forms that nonetheless replicate the rhetorical dynamics of the text. Examples include the following: single point of view first-person narrative sermons representing Ezekiel, the exiles or Yahweh; inductive or plot-like sermons that seek to guide listeners along in the interpretative process; topical sermons developing either a single or multiple themes from the unit; a more deductive sermon form that teaches content in light of the larger context of the discourse; or finally an interactive and dialogical study of the unit.³⁴

3. The sermon demonstrates how one can begin to draw dynamic equivalents from the text and place them within the current rhetorical situation. While its focus remains upon the diegetic levels of both characters and the character-narrator Ezekiel,³⁵ the level of “inner explanation” within the sermon allows the engaged listener to identify

³² Ibid., 21-22.

³³ Ibid., 23.

³⁴ On this point see Duck, *Finding Words of Worship*, 52.

³⁵ The narratological term “diegetic” refers to the differences between narrative levels as for example that between the narrator and characters within the story. Genette explains: “We will define this difference in level by saying that *any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act of producing this narrative is placed*” (*Narrative Discourse*, 228, italics his).

with the individual characters. On this basis the listener can thereby draw equivalent implications for his or her own situation.

As an example of this notion of transference, Brueggemann establishes dynamic equivalents between the historical context of Ezekiel's day and the contemporary North American context. Such a move involves establishing "what it meant" for the characters of Yahweh, Ezekiel and the exiles and "what it means" for current church ministry contexts in the West. On this basis Brueggemann argues that the exiles' contingent view of Yahweh is starkly similar to that of many North American churches preaching a gospel of social utilitarianism. This viewpoint, like that of the exiles, identifies God as attached to certain ideological causes.³⁶ Although the sermon does not make this dynamic equivalent explicit, identification with the various points of view within the sermon potentially allows the engaged hearer to identify similar trends and patterns in his or her theological worldview.

Conclusion

The above multiple point-of-view narrative sermon from Ezekiel 15 advances the goal of integrating theory and practice, biblical studies together with homiletics. This was accomplished by illustrating the transference between a rhetorical-critical-narratological exegesis of the literary unit and the replication of those rhetorical dynamics for the listeners in the sermon itself. This approach potentially allows the hearers personally to experience the tensions of the exigence, and moreover fulfils Craddock's homiletical value of allowing the audience to experience inductively the process of exegesis. In this regard the method itself serves to bring about an experience of the text for the listeners.³⁷ Such preaching elevates audience participation by trusting that listeners will potentially engage, respond and dialogue with the representation of the text. This creates a culture that allows for not only freedom of choice but also views listeners as spiritual people who, with the aid of the Spirit, will accept both the freedom and the responsibility to "finish" the message on their own.

³⁶ Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 85-87.

³⁷ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 44.