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The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: The Biblical Period

Hughes Oliphant Old

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998

383 pages, \$35.00 Paperback

Long have pastors waited for a comprehensive history of Christian preaching. Now comes Presbyterian Hughes Oliphant Old of Princeton's center of Theological Inquiry, with the first of several volumes canvassing the history of the pulpit. He claims a unique perspective at the outset: he will be examining "the reading and preaching of the Scriptures" specifically in order to understand "how preaching is worship" (7). He begins with Moses, reading the freshly delivered Law of God to the children of Israel gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 24:1-11). Thus began, says Old, the liturgical ministry of the Word (25), though he admits that no sermon is mentioned in the passage. He then progresses through the reading and preaching of the Word in Deuteronomy, in which "we have the first series of sermons" in the biblical tradition, from Moses, "the first great preacher" (28). The progression of the liturgical ministry of the Word is studiously related, through the prophets Samuel, Elijah, Amos, both Isaiahs, and Jeremiah (41-84). Old next investigates understandings of this ministry in the Wisdom literature—a novel proposal to this reviewer (84-94). The reading and preaching of Scripture in the Synagogue and Rabbinic schools is traced, which is indeed one of the definitive sources of Christian preaching (94-110). The second division of the book explores preaching in its various manifestations in the documents of the New Testament, in the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline Corpus, James, and First Peter (111-250). Here, of course, he introduces us to the form and content of the sermons of Jesus and those in the Acts, and explores the homiletic-like material in the epistles. Finally, he presents the preaching of the second and third centuries. First, Old looks at its liturgical context as tantalizingly hinted at in tidbits from the Didache, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Hippolytus (255-278). Then Old considers the first actual sermons of the early church, from an anonymous preacher (possibly an elder in the church at Corinth), Melito of Sardis, and Clement of Alexandria (278-306). The book concludes with a celebration of the preaching of the great exegetical preacher Origen (306-352). Thus Old gives us a sturdy survey of the birth and infancy of the ministry of the Word.

Old is much more sure-footed when he analyzes actual sermons. His exploration into the scriptural roots of preaching leaves much to be desired. A major drawback which infects most of the book centers in the fact that a full two-thirds of the scholarship which he enlists dates from before 1970. In

biblical studies, this is at least one generation behind, perhaps two. Such inattention to current (even a decade old!) positions renders many of his conclusions questionable. For example, Old employs von Rad's discredited theory that preaching was the work of the Levitical priesthood, and thus understands the book of Deuteronomy as a "compendium of the preaching of a whole school of preachers" (30), and Moses' words as "no doubt the guidelines of the Deuteronomist's own preaching ministry" (37). Such dependence upon the older form-critical approach goes hand in hand with a naive acceptance of the factual accuracy of historical material in the scriptures. Thus the speeches in Acts remain model sermons (133, 166, citing Dodd), and Jesus' synagogue sermon (Luke 4) becomes "a perfect example of evangelistic preaching" (11)! Absent were any recent studies on the speeches in Acts (Marion Soards), early Christian prophecy (Eugene Boring), or the various kinds of preaching evident in the New Testament (J. I. H. McDonald). But this claim about Jesus reveals a much more deeply troubling theme in the book: to impose a Protestant Christian notion upon a synagogue homiletic form is inappropriate at best. The book is full of supercessionist overtones, if not outright claims ("The rabbis of the time taught the Scriptures, but Jesus preached the gospel" [125]; cf. also pp. 104, 126, 188, 189, 251, 288), however much he may laudably oppose anti-Semitism (288). In our post-Shoah world, this is simply indefensible. Further, he displays a tendency to suggest speculative reasons for a homiletic context, practice, or rationale, and then issue a claim a paragraph or so later, as if these suppositions are now established fact (cf. e.g., pp. 94-95, 127). Finally, he completely overlooks one group of preachers clearly evident in scripture: women. We search in vain for any mention of the sermons of Deborah, Huldah (without whose approval we would have no scripture!), Mary Magdalene, or the Corinthian women prophets. One brief word concerning a problem (in no way Old's fault) which I hope the publisher will overhear: beginning with page 301, it becomes so scrambled that note 207 occurs *three pages* later, and notes 208-213 are entirely missing.

Old plainly loves both preaching and its study, and he clearly knows the flowing tides of its history. His volume is not without value. But we shall unfortunately have to wait a bit longer for a more satisfactory exploration of its roots and infancy.

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