

The Preacher's Bible Handbook

O. Wesley Allen, Jr., Editor

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Introduction

O. WESLEY ALLEN, JR., EDITOR

While there are still some worship traditions that follow the ancient practice of *lectio continua*, reading (and preaching) through a biblical work passage by passage Sunday after Sunday, most do not. The majority of liturgical traditions today jump around the canon (to greater or lesser degrees) week to week in relation to the christological movement of the liturgical year, various pastoral concerns that arise in the congregation, world events that need to be addressed, and the like. Add to this practice the fact that most contemporary approaches to biblical preaching, especially lectionary-based preaching, involve focusing on one individual, isolated passage at a time.

The result of this situation is that preachers, in the rush to prepare a sermon every seven days, find it difficult to study the wider contexts of their focus passages as part of that sermon preparation process. Moreover, the complexity of many biblical writings makes it difficult to know what elements of the wider context should be brought into a sermon and which serve better as background knowledge for the preacher but would be distracting in a sermon. This is especially the case for parts of the canon that do not receive as much attention in the pulpit today as others.

This *Handbook* is intended as an aid for preachers seeking a remedy to this situation. We have gathered a collection of scholars interested in bridging the gulf between the academy's approach to biblical studies and the church's task of proclaiming the gospel in order to provide

readers with introductions to each book of the Bible, presented to help preachers contextualize any passage on which they plan to focus in relation to the historical circumstances, literary structure, and theological themes of the book from which the passage is drawn.

The essays are short enough to be read quickly as part of the weekly sermon preparation process without derailing that process. By design, they do not describe all the elements of the sociohistorical background, literary shape, and theological foci of the writing that might be found in the introduction of a critical commentary and which are certainly helpful for understanding the full depth and complexity of the writing. Instead, they focus on only those elements that are essential for the preacher to know as background and literary/thematic context for any of the passages in the work as the preacher interprets it for a congregation for a given worship service. Specifically, the essays focus on information that the authors think worthwhile and relevant for preachers to share in their sermons as they contextualize the passage on which they are preaching for laity.

Hebrew Bible

Genesis

JOHN C. HOLBERT

Whether or not the stories of Genesis contain genuine history engenders vigorous scholarly debate. Surely, any history lies far in the background of stories designed to illuminate and unify Israel at a later date in the life of the community. What we read in Genesis should be named literary/theological history, for the stories, especially for preachers, must be approached as tales well told rather than history recorded. That said, we hardly imply that the stories are any less vital for preaching. The proper questions to raise in our reading have to do more with plot and character than with archaeology and historical dating.

Genesis may be divided into four distinct sections.

PREHISTORY (CHAPS. 1–11)

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are the prologue of the entire biblical story. In them we discover the central themes of the Bible's interests: (1) Who is God? (2) Who are we humans? (3) What are the relationships between God and the humans? Genesis 1–11 displays a rich series of answers.

In chapters 1–2, God is creator of the world, but that act of creation is offered in two distinct accounts. The first suggests that God (*'elohim*) creates all that is solely by the divine voice, displaying a massive power

and mysterious hiddenness all at once. The second account, in sharp contrast, shows us God (*YHWH 'elohim*) kneeling in the moistened clay, and with dirty fingers shaping human beings on a potter's wheel (2:7). God then places the created *'adam* (this is not "Adam," but a soil creature) in a garden in order that the creature might serve it and protect it (2:15). This God is intimate, as close as our breath.

After God provides the lonely *'adam* with a partner, built from its side, the first couple is soon engaged in rejection of divine commands, eating the forbidden fruit of the garden, then blaming one another, with the result that they are thrown from the garden and made to live in the world the storyteller knows, one where women give birth in great pain while men attempt to extract a meager living from the rocky soil of Palestine (3:16–19). Despite the grim realities, they proceed to have children. Then the tale turns dark, and fratricide marks the first two brothers when Cain murders Abel. As a result, Cain is forced off the life-giving soil and must wander the earth, ironically settling in "the land of *Nod*," which means "land of wandering" (4:16).

Events move from bad to worse as fruit eating leads to fratricide that leads to Lamech threatening to kill any who dares to strike him (4:23). The massive flood ensues, brought on by the vast "wickedness of humankind" (6:5). The charge against humanity is all-inclusive and terrible: "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil all day long" (6:5 alt.). God here is a God who repays bad behavior with universal attack. Yet, after the flood, the tale shifts, as God now acknowledges the weakness of the human creatures and promises never again to destroy them, even though "they are evil from their youth" (8:21 alt.). The same reason that provoked the flood now leads God to vow never to act like that again. In short, the flood's effect is to change the heart of God, not the heart of humanity.

That ongoing human weakness is shown in the person of Noah, the supposed hero of the flood story. After he plants a vineyard, he overindulges in the fruit of the vine, lies naked in his tent, and accidentally is seen as weak and vulnerable by his son Ham. He awakes from his stupor and instead of taking responsibility for his actions, curses his son, and the cycle of separation and family conflict begins again (9:18–25).

The first section concludes with the tale of the tower of Babel, a vast construction designed to create their own unity and to thwart YHWH's demand that they should be "fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth" (the land, 1:28). Though they imagine their tower "has its top in the heavens" (sky), YHWH must "go down" to see it (11:4–5). YHWH then

decides to “confuse their language,” and they are forced to cease their building, abandoning Shinar to “fill the earth.”

The prehistory is an avalanche of evil, from garden to murder to threatened genocide to flood to family destruction to foolish tower building. Through it all, humanity is pictured as bent on evil, creating ingenious ways to reject the demands of their creator God, while that God, first destroying nearly all of them, finally demonstrates a willingness to persist with these recalcitrant humans. Something new is needed, and YHWH acts anew in Genesis 12. This tightly constructed section includes, for the preacher, a changing picture of God, a deeply flawed humanity, and a divine persistence to work with these humans regardless of their actions.

ABRAM AND SARAI (12:1–25:18)

Genesis 12:1–3 is the lynchpin of the entire biblical story. Abram of Haran is called by YHWH to “go from your country, your relatives, and the house of your father to the land I will show you. There I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing, . . . and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (or, “will bless themselves”) (alt.). Abram’s task is universal and missional. YHWH will make Abram’s name great, and that greatness will be defined as a blessing to all humanity through his own person and his descendants. The definition of greatness is service to the world. This central biblical theme is announced at the very beginning of the story of Israel, and no preacher can miss its prominent power.

Unfortunately, humans are weak and inclined toward evil. Abram is no different. He may be called to be a blessing, but his later actions are anything but a blessing. He soon sacrifices his own wife, Sarai, to the Egyptians in a craven attempt to save his own skin (12:10–16); if not for YHWH’s intervention, Sarai would have joined Pharaoh’s harem, and Israel’s story would have ended before it began.

The ominous fact of Sarai’s barrenness drives the remainder of this section’s story. YHWH continues to appear to Abram to promise a son, but the years slip by, and the lines deepen on the aging couple’s faces. In chapter 15, God promises a child, and Abram proposes that a household slave will be his heir, but YHWH calls him to count the stars, vowing that his descendants will be as numerous as they. In chapter 16,

Sarai takes matters into her own hands and offers her maid, Hagar, as Abram's bedmate in order to create an heir. A boy is born, but Sarai cannot stand the sight of the child and demands his destruction. Abram complies, but YHWH intervenes to save Ishmael and his mother. In chapter 17, God again promises an heir, but this time Abram falls on his face in laughter, and in chapter 18, when YHWH promises again, it is Sarah's turn to laugh at the absurdity of a prune-faced couple giving birth.

But, it happens, and the child is named Isaac, "laughter" in Hebrew (chap. 21). Yet that laughter soon turns to horror, as YHWH demands that Abraham murder that child of laughter on a mountain (chap. 22). Without a word, Abraham prepares to do so, but just as he is about to plunge the knife into the boy's throat, YHWH again appears to stop his hand. The spared child then has his own family, and the story turns to section 3.

This second section tells the story of Abraham and Sarah and the complex births of their sons, Ishmael and Isaac. The themes of human desires to direct the world in their own ways rather than allow God to direct the world in God's way, along with the reality of fractured human relationships created by self-serving hubris, all offer rich fare for any preacher.

ISAAC, REBEKAH, JACOB, ESAU, LEAH, RACHEL (25:19–36:43)

Jacob and Esau are born to Isaac and the previously barren Rebekah; they are twins with very different personalities. Jacob is "Grabby," a colloquial version of his Hebrew name meaning "Supplanter," pictured at his birth as grasping the elder Esau's heel. Esau is "Hairy," literally covered head to toe in hirsute splendor. Rebekah has been told by YHWH that, contrary to societal expectations, her younger child will master her eldest. And so it happens, but not without a maternal push. Esau sells his right to be firstborn to Jacob for a bowl of red stuff (25:29–34), and Rebekah helps Jacob to trick her husband out of the patriarchal blessing (chap. 27).

The themes of irony and trickery continue when Jacob flees his brother and heads to Haran, Abraham's home country. On the way, Jacob confronts YHWH at a lonely place, and receives from his God the promise of land, progeny, and protection. In response, Grabby

bargains with YHWH, saying that if YHWH does do all these things, then and only then can YHWH be his God (28:20–22)!

In Haran, he meets Rachel at a well, falls instantly in love, and after seven years of service to his uncle Laban, is supposedly allowed to marry his beloved (chap. 29). But Laban substitutes his eldest daughter, Leah, and hands her, veiled, to the eager embrace of Jacob. When the daylight reveals the truth, Jacob asks Laban about his cruel trick. Laban replies that in this country one cannot marry the younger before the elder. Echoes of earlier tales of deception ring loud.

But Jacob gets his revenge on Laban as he steals the very best of his livestock through magical trickery, despite Laban's ploys (30:25–43). Though Laban works to prevent it, Jacob departs Haran with both of his wives, their servant women, and a vast herd of Laban's finest animals (chap. 31). Upon arriving at the Jabbok River, Jacob wrestles with a man there and claims to have defeated the man (32:28), whom Jacob imagines to be God (32:30). However, he does not actually encounter God until Esau receives him with surprising grace. With all that former trickery forgotten, Jacob is forced to admit that seeing Esau's face is just like "seeing the face of God" (33:10).

This section recounts the story of Jacob and Esau, introducing us to a foolish Esau, who in the end becomes the very face of God in his reception of his rascally brother. God is seen here as the unexpected One, not appearing as humans imagine but showing up in the face of the foolish. This great Bible theme offers a rich resource for the preacher.

JACOB AND JOSEPH (CHAPS. 37–50)

This final section of Genesis is the story of Joseph, the favored son of Jacob and Rachel. Jacob's twelve sons settle again in the land promised by YHWH, but soon strife in the family appears. Joseph is a preening tattletale, living for the opportunity to reveal to Jacob wrongdoing by his brothers (37:2). Nevertheless, Jacob loves Joseph to distraction, because he is a child of his old age with his favorite, Rachel. He thus weaves for him a "long robe with sleeves" (37:3). As a result, his brothers despise Joseph, and after two self-aggrandizing dreams in which Joseph sees himself as master over both his family and the sun, moon, and stars (!) (37:5–11), the brothers plot to kill him.

But instead of murdering Joseph, the brothers throw him into a dry

well, imagining that they have seen the last of him. They lie to Jacob that Joseph has been devoured by beasts, but he is pulled from the well by passing traders and sold to an Egyptian nobleman, Potiphar. Soon clever Joseph is running Potiphar's household and attracting the lustful eyes of Potiphar's wife. The woman compromises Joseph, crying rape. Joseph lands in jail; but in no time, he is running the jail, too (chap. 39)!

And there he correctly interprets two dreams. When these interpretations come to the attention of Pharaoh, who is bedeviled by nightmares, he demands that the jailed dream interpreter act for him. Joseph's correct interpretations save Egypt from a severe famine (chap. 41).

Meanwhile, the famine spreads to Israel, and Jacob demands that the brothers go to Egypt to buy grain. Once there, they are ushered into the presence of their brother, Joseph, whom they do not recognize, since he is now Egyptian in appearance and speaks to them through an interpreter. He, however, recognizes them immediately and proceeds to play a cruel game of cat and mouse with them, first imprisoning one as ransom for the rest, after replacing their grain money back into their bags, then secreting his magic cup into the sack of Benjamin. All the while, Joseph weeps in secret (chaps. 42–45).

At last he reveals himself as Joseph, and the brothers are struck mute. Though he attempts to cover his lengthy game with theological niceties—"God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:7 alt.)—no polite phrases can undo the trickery of the revengeful Joseph.

At the very end of the tale, Jacob dies and is buried back in Israel. Yet the brothers still fear that Joseph will gain his ultimate revenge and "pay them back in full" for what they did to him (50:15). So they lie, claiming that the dying Jacob has bidden Joseph to forgive the brothers for their acts against him. The brothers then prostrate themselves before Joseph and cry out that they will be his slaves if he spares them (50:18). Joseph weeps as he hears them, and the weeping here is Joseph's recognition that he has poisoned his family with his cruel games. Then it is that Joseph utters his most famous phrase: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people" (50:20). "Fear not," he concludes, "I will provide for you and your little ones" (50:21 alt.).

Genesis ends in something like reconciliation, but it is a reconciliation fraught with tension. It is a kind of false ending, even when Joseph dies and is buried in Egypt. Unfinished business, both in the family and

in the community, marks the conclusion of this tale; with the beginning of the book of Exodus, new tensions break out. God is again called on to struggle with God's chosen ones in new ways. Perhaps Israel, the new name of Jacob at Jabbok, does mean "God wrestles" after all.

The preacher finds the following themes stretching across the stories of Genesis: God's surprising appearances in and employment of unlikely and flawed people; human desires to go their own ways against the commands and will of God; God's final unwillingness to give up on God's sinning yet chosen people.

Exodus

LISA WILSON DAVISON

Exodus recounts the story of how God rescues God's people from bondage and leads them to a new land, just as God had promised Sarah and Abraham. In order to do this, God calls three liberators: Moses, Miriam, and Aaron. The final compilation of the book of Exodus probably took place during the exile (sixth century BCE), but many of the stories contained in the book may be much older. The exilic date reminds us that the book is not trying to accurately recount an actual event, but to tell a story of liberation. Exodus can be divided into three sections, based on different settings: Egypt (chaps. 1–15), the Wilderness (15–18), and Mount Sinai (19–40).

EGYPT (1:1–15:21)

Exodus picks up where Genesis ended, a few generations after Joseph and his brothers moved to Egypt. Joseph not only saved his family from the famine but also saved the Egyptians. He gained a place of power and leadership as the pharaoh's right-hand man. By the beginning of Exodus, however, things have changed. The new pharaoh does not remember Joseph, and the descendants of Sarah and Abraham are now slaves, called "Hebrews" by the Egyptians. By this time, the "Hebrews" have become numerous. Gone are the days of barren women. The Egyptians worry that these "foreigners" will become so powerful that

they will rebel and take over the kingdom. Pharaoh uses several tactics to quell the potential threat, escalating the violence to a genocidal level, when slavery and hard labor do not reduce the Hebrews' growth. Two Hebrew midwives (Shiphrah and Puah) are instructed to kill all Hebrew boys at birth. The midwives' civil disobedience thwarts Pharaoh's plan, so he declares that all Hebrew boys be thrown into the Nile.

The story of Moses is both exciting and sad. Moses' survival from infancy, during a time when all Hebrew boys were to be drowned in the Nile, was nothing short of a miracle, orchestrated by his birth mother, his adopted mother, and his sister (2:1–10). The irony of Moses having to flee after murdering an Egyptian in defense of a helpless Hebrew slave (2:11–15a) builds suspense. Moses settles down in Midian, where he marries Zipporah, has a son (Gershom), and works for his father-in-law, Jethro (2:15b–22).

This hero's story pauses to allow an "intrusion note" about God hearing the groaning of the Israelites in their servitude in Egypt (2:23–25). What provokes their crying out? The text does not answer this question, indicating only that the people have managed to find a voice. Their cries prompt God to take action in the story. God has not been mentioned in chapter 2 until this point; suddenly in two verses (vv. 24–25), God is the subject of four important verbs; God "heard," "remembered," "looked," and "took note."

The story returns to Midian. Moses is tending the flocks of his father-in-law on the mountain called Sinai, or Horeb, a sacred place among the Midianites. He sees an incredible sight that the biblical writers could only describe as a bush that was "aflake yet not consumed by the fire" (3:2 alt.). Then, hearing a voice calling his name, he responds, "Here I am," and waits. From the bush comes the voice of God, and God tells Moses to take off his shoes because he is standing on holy ground. Moses does so and hears these words: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (3:6).

The experienced biblical reader will recognize that Moses' fateful words, "Here I am," are a foreshadowing that something dangerous is about to happen. God is sending Moses back to Egypt, where he is a wanted fugitive. God has decided to "make good" on the covenant God made with the ancestors, a promise of land, offspring, and a relationship with God. God wants Moses to convince Pharaoh to let his primary source of slave labor go free (3:7–10). Moses protests against this mission. He cannot see why Pharaoh would listen to him and agree

to this crazy idea. God tries to reassure Moses by promising to be with him as he stands up to the sole ruler of Egypt and risks his own life. God even gives Moses a “sign”: “when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (3:12).

Still unconvinced, Moses tries another tactic. Feeling a bit daring, he asks God for God’s name, and what he gets is a riddle. In the Hebrew Bible, to know someone’s name could indicate that you have power over that person. In response to this request, God says to Moses: “*’eyeh ’asher ’eyeh*” (3:14). The traditional rendering of this Hebrew phrase as “I am who I am” only hints at the depth of the divine riddle. The word *’eyeh* is the first-person singular form of the verb “to be.” Since Hebrew does not have true verb tenses (e.g., past, present, future, etc.), this word could be translated as “I am, I was, I will be, I have been,” and so on. The second Hebrew word, *’asher*, is a relative particle and can mean “that, who, which,” and so on. Thus, this “name” of God can be rendered in numerous ways in English, such as these:

I am who I am.
 I was who I was.
 I will be who I will be.
 I have been who I have been.
 I am who I was.
 I will be who I have been.
 I am that I will be.

Moses cannot have just one word to name God. He, like all preachers and congregations, is reminded that the Divine is beyond human control and comprehension. God’s answer indicates that the only way Moses, the Israelites, or anyone else can “know” God is through God’s activity in the world or through God’s interaction with humanity.

The stories about the dueling between Pharaoh and Moses/God are a key to understanding the function of the plagues (chaps. 5–12). Like all oppressive powers, Pharaoh is unwilling to grant freedom for his slave workforce. The resulting struggle between a God of freedom and human greed reveals that Israel’s God is not only more powerful than Pharaoh but also more powerful than the Egyptian gods. Unfortunately, the liberation of an oppressed group of people rarely happens without a level of suffering and violence.

While the plagues are intended to show God’s power, they do seem to be an unfair punishment for the Egyptian people. This story reminds

us that, most often, the people suffer the consequences of the actions taken by the powerful. Looking at the ten plagues, it is clear that the first nine really did not directly affect Pharaoh. When the waters of the Nile were made unsafe for drinking, the Egyptian people had to dig ditches to find potable water (7:24). Pharaoh, however, had other people to secure his water supply. Likewise, when the locusts ate the crops of the Egyptians (10:1–20), Pharaoh did not go hungry. He had the means and the power to get all the food he wanted, at the expense of the innocent people under his control.

It is only with the last plague, when Pharaoh's son dies, that the repercussions of his oppressive actions affect him directly. Only then does Pharaoh decide to let the Israelites leave. In fact, he sends them away out of fear; he would do anything to appease the Israelites' God and get relief from the curse he was enduring. The killing of the first-born children of the Egyptians, of course, presents some troubling theological questions with which preachers should struggle. What kind of God kills innocent children?

One explanation can be found in the text. When God sends Moses back to Egypt, God tells him to deliver this message to Pharaoh: "Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son" (4:22–23). This is a foreshadowing of how this struggle for liberation will end. From this literary perspective, the tenth plague parallels what Pharaoh has done to the Israelites. The violence continues when Pharaoh realizes what he has done (i.e., just freed his slave labor force) and decides he wants them back. He sends his entire army after the "escaped" slaves, and they pursue the Israelites with the intent of returning them to slavery or killing them. When Pharaoh's army traps the people at the edge of the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites become frightened and blame Moses for leading them out this far only to be killed. As a way of showing the Israelites and Pharaoh that God has the power and is on the side of the oppressed and vulnerable, Moses splits the sea in two parts. Dry land appears, and the Israelites cross safely to the other side.

What happens next is shocking, but it is the only way that the powerless Israelites can be saved from Pharaoh, the powerful. When the Egyptian army enters the dry seabed, in pursuit of the runaways, the waters return to their normal state, and the Egyptian charioteers are drowned. The picture of this watery battlefield evokes memories of other battlefields with dead bodies left where they fell. Pharaoh's

campaign to enslave the Israelites again is a vivid reminder of that senseless loss of life.

When we read the Exodus story, it is tempting to identify with the oppressed Israelites. However, many of us today are more like Pharaoh or at least the Egyptians. How do our comfortable lives and participation in the global economy keep others from enjoying a full life? How do we harden our hearts to the suffering of others? What will it take to change our hearts, so we release our grip on power and privilege?

WILDERNESS (15:22–18:27)

The second section of Exodus tracks the Israelites' journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai. These "Wilderness Wanderings" describe a period of getting acquainted. The people learn about this God who liberated them from slavery in Egypt, and the Lord comes to a better understanding of the kind of people the Israelites are. It is a period of "courting," before any firm commitments are made. Having just witnessed God's saving power, the people begin to complain about the less than ideal conditions of their current situation. This story is part of a larger collection of texts in which the Israelites "murmur/quarrel" against Moses and/or Aaron for their plight; in so doing they complain against God.

This section provides several possible homiletical questions about the nature of faith. In what ways do we, like the Israelites, struggle to trust God, others, and ourselves? How often are we not content with what we have? When do we "quarrel/murmur" against God?

SINAI (CHAPS. 19–40)

At Sinai, after all God has done for the Israelites, God lays out their responsibilities of living in covenant relationship. Up to this point, God has been patient and gracious with what often appears to be an ungrateful people. Now they have reached a point of decision making; they must either sign on to a lifelong covenant with God or face a future on their own.

The Ten Commandments (20:1–17) deal with both the vertical relationship between Israel and God (vv. 3–7) and the horizontal relationships between Israel and other parts of creation and among the Israelites (vv. 8–17). In Israel's covenant with God, both aspects were

of equal importance: one could not be in right relationship with God without being in right relationship with the rest of creation.

At Sinai, God gave the Israelites an invitation to enter into a covenant and provided a set of guidelines for acceptable behavior in that relationship (20:1–21). The Lord then gives Moses more commandments that expand on the original “Top Ten” (20:22–26; 22:16–31; 23–30). While the Lord provides these other requirements, Moses is gone from the people for a long time. In his absence, they become restless and insist that Aaron make them tangible gods, breaking the second commandment (32:1–2). The Lord had warned them that there was “zero tolerance” for idols and severe punishment for the perpetrators. Aaron does not try to dissuade them from this faithless act. He makes a golden calf (v. 4), makes an altar, and declares a “festival to the LORD” (v. 5). In the morning, the people bring offerings and make sacrifices to the calf, and after eating, they begin to “revel” (v. 6).

Seeing how quickly the people have betrayed the covenant, the Lord is overcome with anger and, perhaps, with disappointment. The Lord no longer wants to claim the Israelites, so the Lord puts the responsibility for them on Moses. So great is the divine anger against the people that the Lord wants to be alone so that the Lord’s “wrath may burn hot against the people” (32:10) until it consumes them.

Moses, who had wanted to give up on the Israelites at times when they complained, now defends them. Moses’ tactic for persuading the Lord not to destroy the people is very astute. He does not try to gain a stay of execution for the people based on their character or faith; there is too much evidence to the contrary. Instead, he argues on the basis of God’s character. Moses appeals to the Lord’s ego, reminding the Lord of the covenant made with Israel’s ancestors (32:13a). If the Lord kills the people in the wilderness, then the Lord will break the divine promises of many descendants, a land, and a relationship with the Lord (32:13b). Moses succeeds, and the Lord keeps covenant.

As the story of Israel shows, the relationship between Israel and God was never easy. Given that these stories are Israel’s self-portrayal, it is amazing that the compilers of the Hebrew Bible have not attempted to “clean up” the people’s imperfections. They have painted a picture of a human community struggling to live in right relationship with God, with neighbor, and with self. Sometimes the Israelites succeeded, but more often they failed. Preachers do well to present contemporary people of faith in such an honest light.

Preachers also should recognize that while some of the ancient stories

portray a violent Deity, those depictions were not meant to be taken literally; rather, those stories demonstrate the seriousness of breaking covenant and the Lord's passionate expectations of the people, even knowing how often they had messed up. And indeed, even though they did not deserve God's mercy and steadfast love, God chose to grant them forgiveness over and over, while still holding them accountable for their sins.