

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE STORYTELLER'S COMPANION TO THE BIBLE: VOLUME ONE, ed., Michael E. Williams. Nashville, Abingdon, 1991. 197 pages, hardcover, \$12.95.

Preaching in the decade of the 1980s took a decidedly narrative turn. This is not newsworthy to readers of *Journal for Preachers*, but as we move into the 1990s we may remember that many homiletics books embrace narrative phenomenon as a given. In his 1981 book *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, George Stroup sets the stage when he says, "The core of scripture is a set of narratives which serve as the common denominator for the whole of scripture. These narratives vary in form and content but each of them functions as an explanation for what Israel and the church believe and why they live the way they do." If this is so, as contemporary theological literature indicates, we will continue reading theology from narrative perspectives. Preaching and biblical storytelling will likewise follow suit.

Michael Williams, while editing *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible*, was Director of Preaching Ministries for the United Methodist Church. An accomplished storyteller, this project seemed a natural one, displaying Williams' narrative talents. His collaborator is John C. Holbert, Assistant Professor of Preaching at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. Holbert's gifts in narrative discernment and demonstration are also of considerable repute. This match is a sound one for presenting narrative approaches to preaching Genesis' narratives. In fact, Holbert and Williams seem so well-fitted, the text reveals few seams making up any two-authored book.

The format is straightforward. It starts by explaining the "companion's" purpose: telling biblical stories. Williams says, "Many of us in the Church find occasions when we are called upon or moved to tell someone else one of the foundational stories of our faith. Pastors who are preparing sermons or Bible studies and church school teachers who are planning for their classes are constantly aware of times that a lesson or sermon could be brought to life by simply telling a story from the Bible" (p. 11). The intention is to help persons tell stories, especially from Genesis.

After the statement of purpose, there are two essays: 1) "Reading the Narratives of Genesis," and 2) "What are Midrashim, and What are They Doing Here?," plus a section called "Learning to tell Bible Stories: A Self-Directed Workshop." Each of these prepares readers for what will be encountered in the storyteller's companion. In the first essay, Holbert fleshes out critical components of reading narratives: plot, characterization, point of view. Obviously, these components differ in scope and nature from more traditional questions

asked by form, historical, redaction, or textual criticism. These too are important, but getting at the intent of the original tellers (and writers) is also important. Reflecting on one of the earliest, if not the earliest, mode of communication—telling of story—is today another way to explore these fertile texts.

Williams writes the other introductory essay. He explains how the Rabbis used Midrashim as a method of inquiry to “go in search of the meaning of scripture stories for their lives.”

The “meat” of the book, comprising 172 pages, takes thirty narrative passages from Genesis and applies a prescribed pattern of exploration to each. First, the text is included. This is helpful, saving one the annoyance of going back and forth between the biblical text and the storyteller’s companion.

Second, Holbert comments on each story. Obviously tethered by space limitations, this section serves as a commentary on the chosen pericope. With good humor and witty writing style, Holbert manages to bring out many hidden aspects of each of the narratives. For instance, in discussing Sarai’s dialogue with Abram concerning Hagar he relates what Sarai says, “I put my maid [Sarai wants to be certain that the hierarchy remains clear] into your lap [a rather more literal translation than the phrase often receives], but when she saw that she was pregnant, I became contemptible in her eyes!” (p. 78). Comments on the story made the entire reading worthwhile.

The third part of each section is a retelling of the story. It is intended to be illustrative of “a way” one might teach or preach the story. Williams retells the story in the even-numbered chapters and Holbert in the odd-numbered ones. This segment of each chapter aids creativity, giving liberty to the reserved.

Included also, in each chapter, are rabbinic midrashim covering given pericopes. The sources are well-documented for reader’s further exploration. The stories are engaging and illustrative by themselves; each gives Christian interpretations of Hebrew scriptures a new spin. This is the gift *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible* imparts: new views of ancient material. The midrashim are shaded gray in the text for easy reference.

A colleague recently said to me, “After reading Walter Brueggemann’s *Genesis* in the “Interpretation Series,” I don’t think I would have enough courage to publish anything on Genesis for a while.” This is an acknowledgment of Williams and Holbert’s work: it can be used well with other fine commentaries on Genesis—Von Rad, Brueggemann, Luther, Speiser, and others. It is a book which performs well with commentaries because the companion treats both form and content.

The good news is that a second volume of the storyteller’s series is in now process, treating the biblical narrative in Exodus. If it is done as thoroughly and capably as this first volume, we await another pleasure to relish.