

The Fall of the House of Uzzah . . . and Other Difficult Preaching Texts

by Thomas G. Long

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

Recently, in a seminar on preaching from the lectionary, one of the participants raised an interesting query: can *every* biblical text be preached? In this particular case the question was a keenly practical one since the questioner had spent the night before trying unsuccessfully to extract some sermonic blood from a rather stony set of lections. But the question is an interesting one to bounce around more broadly and theoretically. Are there biblical texts so historically remote, so theologically conflictual, or so hermeneutically intractable that they are simply not legitimate texts for preaching?

Rather than dissecting that problem at length, let me be bold and suggest my own response, namely: yes, there probably *are* biblical texts which cannot, or better *should* not, be preached, but they are fewer in number than one might think. Moreover, I would go on to suggest that it is precisely those texts which seem most difficult or unfruitful to a preacher which may provide the arenas for the most liberating preaching.

At one level I am simply restating the old canon-within-a-canon problem. Most of us who preach have, admittedly, a rather limited set of biblical documents which forms the basis of most of our sermons. That much is obvious. What is often not so obvious is that underlying and governing that "little canon" is usually an implicit biblical theology, more or less personal and systematic, which not only pushes us to select certain texts over others, but also to highlight particular aspects of the texts we *do* choose at the expense of other features of those texts. The preacher who looks at the Magnificat (Luke 1:46ff), for example, and sees only interior spiritual issues at work and not the social justice matters which are clearly there in the text as well, does so because of a prior disposition to see the faith in personalistic terms. We see what we allow ourselves to see, that is, we tend to choose certain texts and then to see only certain things in those texts because of our exegetical and theological presuppositions. That's not entirely bad, of course; in fact we have known at least since Bultmann that exegesis *without* presuppositions is impossible. But our presuppositions should be challenged, our range of hermeneutical vision expanded, and one good way to begin doing that is self-consciously to select on occasion a preaching text which might otherwise be rejected.

At another level, though, I want to suggest that many biblical texts appear unproductive for preaching because of the exegetical *methods* we have been taught to practice. Most of our exegetical processes are built upon the notion that each biblical text *contains* one or more meanings. The task of exegesis, then, is to pull the plum out of the pie, that is, to probe around in the text with word studies and the like long enough to come up with at least one signifi-

cant "meaning" in the passage. This sort of close examination of the conceptual structure of single texts, which might be called "micro-exegesis," does work, of course, and it works often enough and well enough that the practice of it has become virtually *de rigueur* in biblical preaching.

A problem arises, however, when the method encounters a text which seems to contain "meanings" which are either of little current interest (e.g., how to make a cereal offering) or in some way "substandard" in regard to gospel proclamation (e.g., "Go to the ant, O sluggard . . ." or "Happy are they who dash the heads of infants against the rock."). Micro-exegesis yields meanings from such texts all right, but they are meanings we can just as well do without and so we move on to greener pastures. Before we rush to do so, however, it would be good to acknowledge that there are other ways to wrestle with texts. Biblical texts "mean" not only by virtue of the idea they *contain*, but also by virtue of the *roles they play* in the literary and cultural fabrics in which they are found. Richard Nixon's "Checkers" speech, to use a contemporary example, obviously *contains* a number of ideas, the sum of which might be termed, from a certain vantage point, *the* meaning of that speech. The fact of the matter, though, is that the internal ideas of that speech are of relatively little interest compared to its larger meanings in such areas as the manipulation of the television medium, the career of Nixon, the socio-political environment of America in the 50's, and so on. What does the "Checkers" speech mean? It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that what it means is not so much what is *said*, but rather what it *did* and what it *symbolized* in the cultural context.

To get at this aspect of a text's meaning requires that the interpreter stands back from the text and ask questions of function rather than merely questions of content, to perform in essence a kind of "macro-exegesis." In order to demonstrate how this might work for a biblical text and for preaching, I want to report on my own efforts to prepare a sermon on a decidedly difficult, and in many ways offensive, text: the story of Uzzah and the ark found in 2 Samuel 6:1-7.

The Text

A simple reading of this text makes it clear why this passage has more often than not ended up on the homiletical rubbish heap. The passage tells the story of the moving of the ark of God, by David and his men, into the newly-captured city of Jerusalem. As the ark processional arrives at the threshing floor of Nacon, the oxen stumble, the cart bearing the ark tips, and an obscure character named Uzzah reaches out to steady the ark. According to the text, God immediately strikes Uzzah dead for touching the ark. The text itself, then, seems to provide the preacher little to go on other than a superstitious view of the ark and a vengeful and punitive understanding of God. We can appreciate the fact that this text gives traditional commentators no little discomfort, and we can hardly blame a scholar like David F. Payne when he swings out of the jungle on the nearest vine:

Uzzah, with the best of intentions in the world, instinctively put out a hand to steady the ark, and having done so was horrified at his own action, and overcome by fear suffered a heart attack or something of the sort.¹

That explanation of the text is amusingly touching. Amusing because it is so far-fetched, so clearly an attempt to wriggle out of a tight spot. Touching because it is no less clearly an attempt to keep up the good appearance of the faith with the egg of this text all over his face. And, come to think of it, what else can you do with this text other than somehow explaining it away?

One possibility, of course, is to jettison the text in favor of some other more amenable to preaching, and, for some texts, that might be the best option. Before doing that to the Uzzah story, though, I wanted to explore a macro-exegetical approach, to examine the passage from larger and more functional points of view. This did not mean, I hasten to say, that I became disinterested in what the Uzzah text said *per se*, but rather that I now focused my attention on how the story was *used* in various contexts. We use the story of "George Washington and the Cherry Tree" as one piece of the larger mythic view of Washington's character. Freud claims for the Oedipus story a much deeper cultural use than one can imagine if one remains inside the narrative itself. Just so, when this or that ancient Hebrew told the Uzzah story, to what use was it put? This standing back from the text, the macro-exegetical approach, produced several interesting insights:

1) It has been suggested by some that the Uzzah text functioned primarily as a piece of *political rhetoric*. R. A. Carlson, in his book *David, the Chosen King*, advances the notion that the Uzzah story is the narrative manifestation and explanation of what was probably a turbulent change in priestly command.² In the same way that the narrative of the fall accounted theologically for the various miseries of human existence, the story of Uzzah, in smaller fashion, accounted theologically for the decline of the priestly family of Abinadab (to which Uzzah belonged). Regardless of what may have been the more secular reasons for their loss of power, the Abinadab clan was removed because of violations of the sacred rituals of holiness and at the prerogative of God, or so the story insists.

2) The possibility has also been advanced that the Uzzah story functions as a piece of *liturgical drama*. The notion here is that among the festivals of the Hebrews there was a seasonal re-enactment of the coming of the ark to Jerusalem. On its way into Jerusalem the ritual procession would pause, curiously enough at the site of a former shrine of Baal (namely, the house of Obadiah the Gittite, mentioned in 2 Sam. 6:10ff). The Uzzah story would then be recited, giving an "interpretation" of the ceremonial pause and providing liturgical expression of the idea that God sometimes blesses that which lies outside the cultus (i.e., the "pagan shrine") over that which lies inside (i.e., Uzzah). J. R. Porter extends this argument even further, suggesting that the Hebrew festival was a replacement for the Babylonian *Akitu* festival, a ceremony which included the ritual slaying of a criminal.³ The Uzzah story, which involves a "crime" against Yahweh, become a narrative replacement for what was once a

real act of religious capital punishment.

3) In my view, however, the most fruitful macro-exegetical insight came from Anthony F. Campbell's article in *Journal of Biblical Literature* "Yahweh and the Ark: A Case Study in Narrative."⁴ Campbell views the Uzzah story as one of the final episodes in a larger "ark narrative," which begins in 1 Samuel 4. Though scattered throughout 1 and 2 Samuel, the "ark narrative" can nonetheless be identified as a coherent story with its own theological purposes and a unified inner logic. Rather than seeking to find the meaning of the Uzzah story in its political or liturgical context, Campbell seeks to discover its place and function in the overall structure of this "ark narrative." "As a case study," he writes, "the ark narrative is a useful example of narrative functioning as a vehicle for theology . . . (and) where such theological narrative is concerned, every element of the total narrative must be explored for its contribution."⁵

What Campbell finds is that the whole "ark narrative" is built out of repeating "up-down-up" (or "success-failure-success") plot sequences. The Uzzah story, clearly one of the "down" movements of the plot, is a piece of narrative machinery serving to advance the plot toward its ultimate upward thrust. Moreover, the narrator attaches consistent theological value to the various movements of the plot, namely, the plot moves "up" when the ark is recognized as a revelatory symbol of the power and presence of God, "down" when that symbol is comprised. The "down" movement of the Uzzah story in particular serves theologically to strip away any notion of human causality in the progress of the ark and to prepare the reader for the claim that the ark enters Jerusalem "only as a result of Yahweh's favorable will."⁶

Moving beyond Campbell to a homiletical use of his insight, it seems then that the Uzzah story, as a piece of the larger "ark narrative," presents two narrative symbols, Uzzah and the ark, and draws the dramatic tension between them. "Uzzah" represents all human effort to manipulate divine presence and favor; the "ark," as it does throughout the "ark narrative," symbolizes the free power and presence of God, above all human control. The story celebrates the triumph of the "ark" symbol over the "Uzzah" symbol. A sermon, which utilizes this vantage point, must present the same symbols in contemporary terms and develop the same tension as does the original narrative. It must do this while, at the same time, acknowledging, and dealing with, the inevitable puzzlement and sense of repulsion which the story, in and of itself, is sure to create for modern hearers. Those are, it is clear, staggering tasks, and no sermon will be up to them fully. But sermons must be preached, and here is my attempt to be faithful to this extraordinary and difficult passage:

The Sermon

"Just in Case"

A Sermon based upon 2 Samuel 6:1-7

Anyone who has taken a serious trip through the Old Testament knows that there are some rough neighborhoods to be found there. One does not have to go very far before running up on some brutal war being waged, some blood

being spilt, or even some children being gobbled up by bears, often in the name of God. Mark Twain, whose negative views on all this Old Testament carnage are well known, once wrote:

(In the Old Testament) God is always punishing . . . punishing innocent children . . . punishing unoffending populations . . . even descending to wreak bloody vengeance upon harmless calves and lambs. . . . If God had a motto, it would have read, "Let no innocent person escape."

Touché . . . and case in point: the story we have just read about Uzzah and the ark. As the story goes, King David having just captured Jerusalem and made it his capital, wished to make the city a religious center as well as a political and military one. So, he decided to bring the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's holy presence and power, from the town where it had been housed, into Jerusalem itself. David and his men loaded the ark onto an ox cart and headed out. On the way, however, the oxen stumbled, the cart tipped, and Uzzah reflexively reached out to steady the ark. Thoughtful . . . responsible . . . prudent . . . except that Uzzah was rewarded for his prudence by being struck dead by God on the spot.

Now this is clearly something of a mean street as biblical avenues go, and it is interesting to see how the Old Testament commentators attempt to travel on it. Some of them act like tour guides on a Gray Line bus tour, trying to divert our attention to the lovely skyline of Jerusalem just ahead, as the driver tears through this particular slum. Others wrinkle their noses at the ancient Hebrews and their crude legends, while an occasional unsuspecting scholar, arriving in Uzzah's neighborhood before having the chance to roll up his windows and lock his doors, is forced to look at the story itself in open-mouthed shock. One I read finally blubbers out, "An encounter with the living God is a terrible thing . . . cf., Annanias and Sapphira."!

Well, to be sure there is some rough-edged legend mixed in with history here, and the critics are right: the first impression of God given here is out of "synch" with the God we meet in Jesus Christ. But it would be a serious mistake to dismiss this story with the wave of a hand as a piece of moldy barbarism. The very fact that it rubs us the wrong way may, in fact, be a sign that we have outgrown it . . . or it may be the sign that it brings some needed corrective to the way we understand ourselves, our faith, and God. Like Jacob wrestling beside the river, we should not let this story go until it has at least the chance to bless us.

The only place I know to begin wrestling with this story is to ask the question, "What did Uzzah do that was so bad?" I mean he's walking along beside the ark, the cart tips, he spontaneously reaches out to steady the ark and . . . But maybe there is a deeper question to ask: "What does that spontaneous, impulsive action reveal?" We sometimes reveal more of the truth about ourselves by what we do and say reflexively, spontaneously, than by our calculated statements and arranged positions. A spontaneous gesture can reveal a universe.

For example, some of my students in the seminary who are women are kind enough to tell me that, when I depart from my lecture notes and begin to speak extemporaneously, my language is often very male-oriented. Most of the

time, in my spontaneous speech, ministers are "he," and church workers are "laymen" and God is always "He." Of course I respond to all this: "Don't blame me. I'm simply using spontaneously, reflexively, the language which I have inherited from my *forefath* . . ." Ah . . . a spontaneous word, a spontaneous gesture can reveal a universe . . . a universe dominated by male power and masculine modes of thought.

Or again, a mother takes her two-year-old to visit the new neighbor who has just moved in down the street. After only a few minutes of getting acquainted, the child grows restless and begins to explore the room. The mother says, "Honey, don't bother things." To which the new neighbor responds, "Oh, don't worry about him. There's not a thing in this house he can hurt, and even if he did, they're just things. *He's* a lot more important than any old thing." Just at that instant, however, the child brushes up against a vase and tips it off the end table. The new neighbor lunges across the floor like a wide receiver, catching the vase a millimeter before destruction. "They're just things. . . ." but, a spontaneous gesture reveals a universe.

Or, closer to the point: a short time ago I was riding a public bus in Denver. As the bus slowed down I noticed that waiting at the stop was a man in a wheel chair, his body severely paralyzed and twisted. When the bus stopped, the driver pressed a lever, and a mechanized ramp extended from the side of the bus and lowered it to the curb. With great skill the man rolled his wheel chair onto the ramp. He'd done this before and was an expert at it; you could tell. The driver pushed the lever again, and the ramp raised up to the door of the bus. The man rolled his chair forward. As he took out his fare, however, the chair suddenly began to roll back toward the still open doorway. With no problem at all the man quickly grabbed one of the wheels and brought the chair to a halt . . . but not before the bus driver had reflexively lurched forward to grab the man. When the man looked at the driver his first expression was not of gratitude, but of sadness and of having been betrayed. It was a look that said, "So, you really didn't think I could handle myself after all, did you?" A spontaneous gesture reveals a universe.

So, here we have Uzzah walking along side the ark. If we had interviewed him he would probably have been able to rattle off the orthodoxy of his day. Do you believe in God? Yes. The God above all gods? Yes. Whose holiness is above the heavens and whose majesty shames earthly kings, who holds all time in his hands, who laid the foundations of the earth? Yes . . . yes . . . yes. And when the oxen stumbled, and with a spontaneous gesture that revealed a universe, Uzzah confessed his real faith: a God so impotent that if the box falls God falls; a God so weak that this God needs the help of the likes of Uzzah to dotter across the street; an empty shell of a God trapped inside fragile religious symbols. Do you see Uzzah reaching out now?

- I see Uzzah reach out to steady the ark every time somebody turns down the rheo-stat in the sanctuary so that worship will "work."
- I see Uzzah reach out to steady the ark every time we trade good theology for some sure-fire gimmicks to keep the stewardship program from falling off the cart.
- Every time we compromise the gospel with a little pop sociology to get the

church to grow, Uzzah steadies the ark once again.

R. E. C. Browne once noted that part of the trauma of preaching is that the gospel seems to be too little for people to live on. The temptation, says Browne, is to go beyond the authority of the gospel to make our authority strong and clear, to become a dispenser of wise thoughts and helpful advice. But Browne nails that on the head when he says, "That going beyond is always the outcome of an atheistic anxiety" (*The Ministry of the Word*, 40).

We believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth . . . but just in case, we reach out to steady the ark.

The first church I served, right after seminary, was a troubled congregation, not so much internally as externally. We were, to put it mildly, in a bad location, right next to a busy airport and in a formerly residential neighborhood rapidly becoming commercial and industrial. We had a strong spirit, but our neighborhood was disappearing before our very eyes. One night we were having one of those "What-are-we-going-to-do?" session meetings, brainstorming ideas to keep the church on the ox cart. Maybe we can move . . . no, too expensive; and where are we going to move? Maybe we could hire a youth leader and jazz up the youth program. Maybe we could advertise in the Saturday paper. Maybe we could do a neighborhood canvass . . . maybe, maybe, maybe. Finally one elder who had been silent spoke up. "Look, we've been here a long time as a church, worshiping, preaching, teaching, visiting the sick, trying to do God's work. Many people have been touched by this church. I think we just ought to keep on doing the best we can to be the church, and if this congregation dies, let it die. God's work will still get done in this place." Because he believed in a God who works in the world even when congregations falter, and institutions wither, and oxen stumble, he didn't have to reach out his hand to steady the ark.

As for Uzzah's story, I am as bothered as anyone by the violence in this passage, but, all things considered, I think we need a God whose presence and power are to be taken seriously more than a god who has to be helped across Church street.

NOTES

¹ David F. Payne, *1 and 2 Samuel, The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 184-5.

² R. A. Carlson, *David, the Chosen King* (Stockholm; Almqvist and Wiksell, 1964), 84.

³ J. R. Porter, "The Interpretation of 2 Samuel VI and Psalm CXXXII," *Journal of Theological Studies* V (1954): 172.

⁴ Anthony F. Campbell, "Yahweh and the Ark: A Case Study in Narrative," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98/1 (1979): 31-43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42. See also J. M. De Tarragon, "David et L'Arche: II Samuel, VI," *Revue Biblique*, LXXXVI (1979): 514-23, which takes a theological approach similar to Campbell's.