

1-1-2003

Apocalypse, Theology, and the Performative Reading of Scripture

Stephen Johnson
sjohnson@acu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Stephen (2003) "Apocalypse, Theology, and the Performative Reading of Scripture," *Leaven*: Vol. 11: Iss. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol11/iss4/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Apocalypse, Theology, and the Performative Reading of Scripture

STEPHEN JOHNSON

Week by week the preacher takes up residence before the word of God for the purpose of its proclamation. The preacher joins the long procession of those summoned to dwell in this particular locale. It is a procession that stretches far and wide and consists of all those preachers past and present, living and dead, who have been called to engage the text faithfully. In each time and place, the relationship between preacher and text depends much upon how one understands the nature of that relationship.

In the more recent history of biblical interpretation, the relationship between the preacher and the word of God is understood in terms of the historical distance between the two. Preachers are taught that to arrive at the meaning of the text they must first read the text as historically located correspondence wrapped in the cultural idioms of the ancient world and its situation. In fact, one of the characteristic features of modern exegesis is to assume the great distance between the ancient world of the text and the contemporary world in which one lives.

The preacher must be equipped with considerable skill in order to traverse the vast distance between these two worlds. Arriving in the ancient world of biblical writers, the preacher must use the proper tools in order to undertake the critical task of excavating the one true and original meaning of the text. Upon mining this precious nugget of truth, the preacher must then muster the determination to make it back to the contemporary world with the precious cargo intact—a treacherous journey indeed.

At this point, modern exegesis bears the distinct marks and assumptions of the modern worldview. The relationship between the text and the preacher is mediated by a critical scientific methodology so that both the text and the preacher are objectified. The great irony is that when the relationship between preacher and text is conceived in this way, the preacher is often led away from the text rather than into it.¹

How many of us have found that while our sermon preparation began with a close and careful reading of the text itself, soon enough we were sorting through the historical contingencies, postulations, and theories served up to us in a critical commentary? And how many sermons have we heard where these interesting postulations and theories are then served up to the congregation so that the text itself feels as though it is pushed to the background?

In many ways, those of us who engage the word of God for the people of God week by week instinctively discover that a journey between the ancient world of the text and the contemporary world in which we live does not fully or accurately account for the nature of the relationship between the text and preacher.

What if the relationship between preacher and text were guided by certain theological assumptions rather than modern methodological ones? The relationship between preacher, text, and proclamation would be formed out of a distinct sense of who God is by his word. A careful reflection upon who God is by his word would form the foundation for the preacher's encounter with the text week by week for its proclamation. What do we believe about the word of God, and how does that inform our relationship with the text for preaching?

A THEOLOGY OF THE WORD OF GOD

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said ... and there was ..." (Gen 1:1-5)²

Out of silence, God speaks, and something happens. Order is called out of chaos by the word of God. The world is created. Here is a foundational claim of our faith: the word of God makes a world, not just any world, but one fashioned in his image, out of God's very essence. We believe that words possess this kind of power—power to create and sustain God's new world. Embedded deep within this belief about God and his word are two foundational claims: the word of God is *performative* and the word of God is *particular*.

The Word of God Is Performative

By performative, we mean that words do not merely refer to something but enact something. Language possesses this kind of performative power. We know this to be true. When two people stand and say words such as, "I take you as my lawfully wedded husband," an arrangement that did not exist before is called forth simply by the speaking of the words. Elie Wiesel writes of the day when Nazi troops arrived in the Hungarian town of Sighet, where he was a young Jewish boy.

For us it was too late, in every sense. Sacrificed abandoned, and betrayed, delivered to the invader and left to face him alone, we were ignored by everyone but the enemy. He alone paid attention to us. And when he drove us to the ghetto, we went. I see images of exodus and uprooting, reminiscent of a past buried in memory; ravaged, dazed, disoriented faces. Everything changed overnight. A few words uttered by a man in a uniform, and the order of Creation collapsed. Everything was dismantled; ties were severed. ... Homes became unrecognizable.³

Words possess the power to create and evoke a new arrangement of things.

The performative nature of language is seen, for example, in the Old Testament story of the blessing of Jacob by Isaac. Old in age, with eyes dim, Isaac desires to bless his first-born and favored son, Esau. Only Esau's younger twin, Jacob, deceives their father, and by his trickery, Jacob receives the words of his father's blessing:

May God give you the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and the plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you! (Gen 27:28-29)

Esau later comes for the blessing only to find his younger brother has beaten him to it. He explains the deception to his father who "trembles violently" and says, "I have blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!" Esau pleads with his father to grant the blessing of his birthright—but to no avail. The word of blessing spoken upon Jacob is effective to make what has been spoken come to pass. Isaac cannot take back his word, for the spoken word possesses the power to enact that of which it speaks.

Interestingly, what Isaac calls forth by the word of his blessing is a reversal of fortune where the younger (weaker) is elevated above the older (stronger). By the word of his blessing, Isaac evokes what we might call an "alternative world" that stands over against the conventional arrangement of things in the world as it is usually conceived.

The notion of performative language that calls forth an alternative world is found throughout scripture. The recounting of the Exodus story for the people gathered at Shechem in Joshua 24 or the vivid and imaginative language of the prophets to exiled Israel functions to evoke an alternative possibility in the midst

of current experience. If time and space were to permit, we could trace the performative nature of Jesus' preaching and teaching. There is inherently within the nature of the word of God a performative function.

The Word of God Is Particular

Because we believe that the word of God is performative, we also understand it to be particular. In each of the examples offered above, words function to enact something in particular. The word of God moves toward a specific refiguring of the world, a world reflecting his very essence and nature. Because the word of God moves toward something specific, it employs particular language and imagery to prefigure that which it evokes. As scripture functions to create and sustain this alternative world, it employs its own distinct epistemology and ontology; it produces its own logic. The language, imagery, and symbolism embedded within scripture are particular.

This is precisely the work of John of Patmos, an oft-overlooked biblical preacher. John, exiled on the island of Patmos, is in the Spirit when he begins his message to the churches. What does John's message do? Over against the dominant socio-political arrangement that constitutes "empire," John outlines the contents of another world.

This alternative world stands in contrast to Rome and her ways. John employs language to describe this world, which appears to us strange and foreign. However, it is actually language belonging to the people of God, employed by the prophets to speak of the new reality God has promised to enact. John is not inventing new language and imagery. He is employing the distinct dialect of God's people, particular language, toward the new thing God is doing in the midst of the old.

John names, with striking accuracy, a decaying world order that is passing away and envisions an emerging world order brought forth by the eternal purposes of God and declares, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his messiah and he will reign forever and ever" (Rev 11:15). John's use of text, both performative and particular, is captured in the word *apocalypse*. Preaching that constructs a new and alternative world in the midst of the old is apocalyptic.

I would argue that this robust apocalyptic sense, both performative and particular, best accounts for the encounter between the word and the preacher.

The preacher reads texts apocalyptically.⁴ The preacher is guided in his relationship with the text by this sort of theological sense⁵ rather than a modern critical methodology. Apocalyptic reading allows the preacher to participate with God in world-making, announcing the arrival of a new kingdom, and declaring lives held captive to the old world order free to roam about in new possibility.

The exiled preacher, John of Patmos, has invited the church to enter into a world where peace is born not on the back of Rome's war horses, chariots, or economic prowess but by the self-giving, self-emptying life modeled for us in the dying of Jesus. As Jesus before him, John declares this new world in the midst of the old using particular speech in evoking this new world order. So God, who in the beginning spoke a word to create, by grace invites the preacher to participate with the Holy Spirit in the ongoing work of world-making by words.

As the preacher reads the text in this apocalyptic way, he or she does so bi-focally—to see things both near and far with accuracy. In one lens, the text is allowed to name the old world for what it is in its brokenness. This old decaying world order is often in the fore and dominates our vision. We become so accustomed to its way that we assume it to be the norm. As the preacher engages with the text, her or his vision of the old world, though near, is clarified so that the text is allowed to name the powers of the old world for what they are—false.⁶

The notion of performative language that calls forth an alternative world is found throughout scripture.

In another lens, the text imaginatively prefigures another reality. The new world created in the text is often on the horizon and hardly noticed because of the ways in which the old world crowds the preacher's vision. Within the text, the preacher has not only found an accurate vision of the world but an accurate vision of God. The text functions so that scripture becomes a living word present for the church. As a result, scripture and its proclamation are no longer held hostage by a methodology that requires the preacher to straddle antiquity and modernity. When preacher and text are no longer objectified, the word of God is present for the church.⁷

What I am suggesting is that the relationship between preacher and text is best guided by an apocalyptic theological sense.⁸ The preacher comes to the text each week as an apocalyptic theologian guided by certain confessional understandings about the nature of the word of God as performative and particular. As apocalyptic theologian, the preacher participates in the ongoing work of God to call forth the new creation in the midst of the old. The question then becomes: what sort of reading strategies are informed by and move toward these apocalyptic ends?

READING "IN THE WORLD OF" THE TEXT

Paul Ricoeur proposes that imagination, far from a fantastic escape from reality, is the capacity to work through images, metaphors, and narratives as a way of evoking and constructing an alternative world.⁹ Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy aligns itself closely with performative and particular theological readings of texts. He describes three worlds in relation to the text:

1. The world "behind the text" consists of those historical elements that produced the text.
2. The world "before the text" consists of the world that we inhabit in the present moment.
3. The world "of the text" refers to the world figured within the text itself.

If engagement with the text is primarily occupied in the world "behind the text," the text itself tends to become objectified and distance created between the text and the preacher is often experienced by the listener. If one's engagement with the text is primarily occupied in the world "before the text," too often the text is relativized and sometimes even co-opted by the contemporary context. But when the engagement with the text is primarily in the world "of the text," the text is allowed to speak on its own terms to evoke a new world.

Ricoeur is convinced that the primary work of interpretation is to live in the world of the text.¹⁰ Ricoeur's notion of reading "in the world of the text" is precisely the sort of reading our apocalyptic theological instincts would encourage.

Engaging the Text with Spiritual Artistry

Reading apocalyptically in the world of the text, the preacher will become a careful and patient observer of surroundings, noticing the distinct world created by the particular language and imagery in the text. The preacher who reads *in* the world of the text rather than *behind* it might best be conceived as an artist rather than a scientist.

This is not to suggest that some of the tools and benefits of scientific readings in the text are unimportant, useless, and to be avoided. But science as a methodology implies, even requires, distance between the object and the observer. The image of the artist, however, implies a subjective participation in the encounter with the text.

As Mark Burrows suggests, rather than "critical exegesis," we might employ the language of "a constructive interpretive art, shaped by an aesthetic or a poetic approach to the biblical text."¹¹ Conceived in this way, the preacher engages in "a spirituality of reading" that does not exclude critical reading but moves toward meaning after or beyond critical engagement with the text.¹²

In describing his work with students, Walter Brueggemann says, "In general, my pedagogical approach is to engage in 'close reading,' to invite students to slow down and pay attention to the artistic detail of the text."¹³ If the preacher is to stand in the world of the text, it will require precisely this sort of posture in relation to the text.

I ask students to begin their engagement with the text with this sort of close or deep reading by asking them to pray the text slowly and carefully in the manner of *lectio divina*. I coach them to seize upon the language particular to the text in an exercise called "Exploding a Biblical Image." In this exercise, they seize upon the dominant imagery within the text itself. They enter into the language and imagery of the text so as to inhabit the world of the text. No longer objectified, the preacher now stands within the text, not over it.

Employing Literary and Rhetorical Reading Strategies

To read apocalyptically in the world of the text is not an undisciplined practice. In fact, there are helpful disciplines that serve reading in the world of the text. Rather than requiring the preacher to begin outside of the text, exploring the world behind it, the disciplines of literary and rhetorical criticisms lead the preacher to deal with the text itself and thereby be immersed in the world it creates. Rhetorical criticism, as Brueggemann points out,

focuses on the artistic processes that operate in the text and generate an imagined world within the text. Such artistic attentiveness takes seriously the exact placement and performances of words and phrases, of sounds and repetitions that give rise to an alternative sense of reality that was not available without this particular configuration of words and images.¹⁴

In both literary and rhetorical readings of Scripture, the text itself becomes the object of attention and draws the preacher within the text.

Reading the Text Theologically

Is it possible for us to enter into the apocalyptic sense created by the larger biblical narrative and embedded with each story therein? Perhaps no recent scholar calls more for an explicitly theological reading of the text for preaching than Paul Scott Wilson.¹⁵ Wilson calls for preachers to engage the text for its "God sense"—allowing that sense to guide both exegesis and proclamation. He coaches preachers to identify the "trouble" and "grace" within the text and allow these two theological themes to shape the sermon.

To read the text theologically, the preacher must have a well-formed theological sense. This cannot always be assumed, because in most preparation for ministry, a clear separation exists between the disciplines of biblical text and theology. What this calls for is a deliberate and purposeful collaboration so that the reading of texts is informed by one's theology even as the reading of text is informing one's theology.

The relationship between the word of God and the preacher is of vital importance for proclamation. Rather than finding this relationship mediated by a modern critical methodology, the preacher is best guided by a robust apocalyptic sense to dwell "in the world of the text." These three moves—engaging the text with spiritual artistry, employing literary and rhetorical reading strategies, and developing a keen theological sense—guide a preacher to read "in the world of the text."

If the preacher engages the text in this way, what sort of sermons might be formed? The possibilities are not only numerous but also represent the ever-present hope of the renewal of preaching in our own time and place.

STEPHEN JOHNSON

Dr. Johnson is an assistant professor of preaching at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas. Currently, he is on sabbatical, studying and doing research at the Toronto School of Theology in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

END NOTES

- 1 Walter Brueggemann argues the limitations of historical-critical readings, stating, "Students have been taught in a modernist society to raise historical questions to such an extent that the text is overlooked. A detailed lining out of the historical context usually receives a good deal more attention than the text itself." Walter Brueggemann, "That the World May be Redescribed," *Interpretation* 56 (October 2002): 359-60.
- 2 All citations of scripture taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
- 3 Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (Toronto: A.A. Knopf Canada, 1995), 64. Italics added.
- 4 Although specifically addressing the preaching of apocalyptic texts, David Jacobsen has argued for an apocalyptic lens for reading scripture. He says reading texts in this way allows the text to have priority over the preacher so the aim of the preacher is not to "get the text" (i.e., figure it out like a riddle) but that "the text gets you." See Jacobsen's helpful description in *Preaching in the New Creation: The Promise of New Testament Apocalyptic Texts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), especially the first chapter, "A Road Map for an Odd World."
- 5 Most notably, Paul Scott Wilson has made considerable strides toward the recovery of preaching as a theological task. Surveying the attention and prescriptions for preaching over the past few decades, Wilson maintains that there yet persists a declining ability to communicate faith. The problem, he says, is a theological one necessitating a theological answer. The roots of such a theological dilemma "lie deep in the soil of the biblical text and meanings preachers find there." Paul Scott Wilson, "Preaching as a Theological Venture," *Papers Presented to the Academy of Homiletics* (December, 2002): 64.
- 6 For a recent and thorough discussion, see Charles L. Campbell, *The World Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).
- 7 New Testament scholar Richard Hays has stated that "despite the important contributions of historical criticism, churches have not always been treated well by those guilds." He points out, "Problems arise when we try to separate the Bible from the church's ancient traditions of theological interpretation." See David W. Reid, "Interpreting a Scholar: Richard Hays' Moral Vision," *Divinity Magazine* 2 (Fall 2002):14-16.
- 8 This point is argued quite well by Mark Love, "Funding the Sermon with Theological Imagination," in *Preaching Romans: Rochester Lectures on Preaching*, vol. 4, ed. D. Fleeer and D. Bland (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 2002), 127-48.
- 9 Perceptive readers will observe the obvious connections between Ricoeur's thought and the work of Walter Brueggemann. As a philosopher, Ricoeur possesses certain theological concerns. In many ways, Brueggemann is extending the work of Ricoeur and attempting to follow the trajectory laid out therein. This is most obvious in Chapter 5 of Brueggemann's book, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).
- 10 Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).
- 11 Mark S. Burrows, "To Taste with the Heart: Allegory, Poetics, and the Deep Reading of Scripture," *Interpretation* 56 (April 2002):168.
- 12 Burrows suggests that we learn from the allegorical readings of scripture practiced by medieval monks, acknowledging that although we can not return to precritical state, we can come upon a "second naïveté."
- 13 Brueggemann, "That the World May be Redescribed," 360.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 See Paul Scott Wilson, *God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) and *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

