

***Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church***  
**by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.**  
**Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, MI (2003)**  
**Reviewed by Paul S. Lamey**

Walter Kaiser, former President of Gordon-Conwell Seminary and distinguished theologian, has given the church a gift in one of his recent works *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (hereafter *PTOT*). Those familiar with Kaiser know that his specialty has been in the area of Old Testament theology and exegesis. Over the last three decades he has produced a constant body of work related to the understanding and exposition of the Old Testament. Kaiser continues this commitment in this latest volume.

Kaiser begins *PTOT* with an introduction offering a sober analysis of the contemporary scene. As one who travels a great deal as a guest preacher, Kaiser observes that “It is possible to attend some churches for months without ever hearing a sermon from the older testament, which represents well over three-fourths of what our Lord had to say to us. This vacuum is unconscionable for those who claim that the whole Bible is the authoritative Word of God to mankind” (10). For Kaiser this is a call to arms and a theme that he will return to often in *PTOT*.

One other notable theme that is intimated in the introduction is the issue of authorial intent. Kaiser shows his indebtedness to John Bright who pointed out that the text has but one meaning and that meaning is only discoverable through grammatical-historical exegesis. Kaiser states that returning to such a method “is the only way to rule out all subjective and personal readings of the text that are without authority or backing of the one who claimed to have received this word as a revelation from God” (10-11). This reviewer believes this emphasis is one of the key strengths of Kaiser’s work in general and this book in particular. Much of the hermeneutical confusion in our day could be remedied by embracing Kaiser’s thesis.

The rest of *PTOT* is divided into two sections with a total of eleven chapters (222 pages, including 17 pages of endnotes and various indices). Part 1 is entitled “The Need to Preach and Teach from the Old Testament” (chaps. 1-4). Part 2 is entitled “How to Preach and Teach from the Old Testament” (chaps. 5-11). There are also a number of helpful features added in the back matter of *PTOT*. There are two practical appendices, endnotes, a helpful glossary, subject, author, and scripture indices. These features only add to the overall quality and usefulness of *PTOT* and are always welcomed inclusions in this reviewer’s opinion.

Chapter One, “The Value of the Old Testament for Today” outlines a number of salient points and insightful perspectives. Kaiser details a number of reasons for the OT’s value. One of the key insights in this chapter was his reasoning that “it [i.e., the OT] leads us to Jesus the Messiah.” The author recognizes that “a significant portion of modern scholarship shares a skeptical attitude toward the messianic consciousness of the Old Testament writers” (20-21). This is not only accurate it is a sad reality given the fact that ministers of the Gospel can preach large portions of Scripture and miss what those portions anticipated in the progress of revelation. Methodologically Kaiser believes that one solution to this dilemma is to read the Bible in the correct way. By this he intends

that “reading the Bible backward is incorrect historically as well as procedurally” (26). Furthermore he notes that “The tendency to interpret the Bible backward is a serious procedural problem, for it will leave a large vacuum in our teachings and provide seedbeds for tomorrow’s heresies. It is reductionistic to level out the Bible to say only what the New Testament has said!” (28). With this opening chapter Kaiser essentially throws a grenade into the midst of many popular hermeneutical assumptions. The author places his finger on the very nerve of popular views of the relationship between the Testaments. Some authors and theologians simply assume that a so-called “apostolic hermeneutic” is the only way forward yet Kaiser intimated in the opening chapter that there are numerous problems with such assumptions and careful exegetes would do well to give his warnings due attention.

In chapter two, “The Problem of the Old Testament for Today,” there are many nuggets worth exploring but the author’s discussion, though brief, of 1 Peter 1:10-12 is illuminating in regards to the NT’s view of what the OT Prophets knew and when they knew it. Also helpful in this chapter is Kaiser’s discussion of biblical theology and the unity of Scripture. Some covenantal theologians have a tendency to “flatten-out” the Scriptures as they impose *their* understanding of the NT back on those who were the original recipients of the OT. To another extreme, some dispensational theologians show tendencies for methodological divisions rather than redemptive unity. Kaiser offers that “My solution is to understand the two testaments as part of one continuing, unified plan of God” (37). He further states that he would “recommend the appropriation and study of the diachronic scheme of the promise through the ages of biblical history as the best way to achieve such a biblical theology in preparation for doing expository preaching and teaching” (38).

In chapter three, “The Task of Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament Today,” it is worth signaling out Kaiser’s discussion of biblical typology. The author insightfully attributes the abuse of typology to one of the reasons the church has lost the OT in its preaching. Kaiser defines typology thusly, “...all true biblical types have clear divine designations shown in the same contexts with the alleged type from the Old Testament.” He correctly observes that details are often pressed well beyond what the original authors ever intended or beyond what the text could possibly render. “The problem,” he notes, “with typology is that many take it far beyond what we have biblical authorization to do” (43-44). This reviewer finds this discussion helpful and lucid much along the same lines as Roy Zuck’s discussion of typology in his *Basic Bible Interpretation* (169-93).

Chapter four concludes Part One of *PTOT* with a look at “The Art and Science of Expository Preaching.” There is so much to commend in this chapter that this reviewer has marked-up the pages beyond recognition. Kaiser is at his best in this chapter showing the necessity of the single-meaning approach to Scripture. He writes, “The place we must begin is with the plain, natural, original, historical meaning of the passage. If we ever abandon that as our starting point, we will have forfeited all hope for arriving at any agreed sense of meaning of a text” (51). This chapter is full of practical advice and “how-to” information which will greatly aid the expositor. It is also in this chapter that Kaiser intimates where he is headed in the remaining chapters of *PTOT*. It is here that he broaches the subject of genre analysis writing that, “The sermon, then, is anchored in the meaning first given to the text by the author. This meaning is further signaled by the

literary genre that encapsulates the original message of the text. It is further limited by the extent of the teaching block or periscope that goes to make up the sections of the book” (54).

The remaining chapters provide the reader with a helpful and basic introduction to genre analysis. The word “genre” refers to “A literary type or form of a composition or section of the Bible” (213). Some theologians also refer to this as “form criticism” taking note of the *form* or *shape* of the text. Like any discipline this *formgeschichte* has had extreme proponents who see it as a way to explain away the miraculous or to demythologize the text (e.g. Bultmann). It should be noted that this is not how Kaiser understands genre analysis. Kaiser’s goal is to show how narrative, wisdom, prophetic material, laments, torah, praise, and apocalyptic literature all have distinct aspects which aid the preacher or teacher in understanding the text before him.

These chapters serve as a basic introduction and will allow numerous opportunities to jump off and explore the genres in more detail. One helpful aspect of this final section is that Kaiser concludes each study of a particular genre with a sample sermon manuscript from that genre. So, for example, he offers his sermon notes from Daniel 9:20-27 after discussing the apocalyptic genre and Leviticus 16:1-34 after his look at preaching torah. For future editions of this work it may prove more resourceful to include an actual CD with recorded sermons rather than excerpts from manuscripts.

It is mildly discouraging to see that the chapter on “Preaching and Teaching Narrative Texts of the Old Testament” (pp.63-82) is virtually an exact reproduction of his contributions to no less than two other books (*Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* [eds. David M. Howard, Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti, 2003], 439-54); (*Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genre of the Old Testament* [eds. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., 1995], 69-88). While it is refreshing to see that Kaiser’s basic convictions on this matter have not changed it still might prove useful for him to show further refinement and development in this area.

In the final analysis, Kaiser’s work is a gift to the church because 1) many will benefit from this book’s theme beyond those who might usually read such a book (i.e., pastors) and 2) he writes for the church and not for the academic ivory tower elite. Kaiser seems to clearly understand that theologians are gifts to the church and should not hide behind the mantle of academia. He writes with a readable style and a prophetic voice that is refreshing as it is rare among academicians. This book will prove useful and enormously insightful to the pastor, Sunday school teacher, or anyone desiring a better grasp of the text of the OT and how it should be taught in the church. As Kaiser has now entered retirement, it is this reviewer’s hope that the Lord will increase his pen and continue to use his writings to revive the need for clear exposition of the sacred text in the church of Jesus Christ.